

The Bema Seat Blues

In Biblical Christian circles we often hear of the bema seat, the place from which Jesus will judge the lives and works of the redeemed as they enter heaven. The word “bema” does not appear in Scripture. The word was used to identify a raised platform from which Greek orators would speak. It also was a place on which a bench or seat would be placed where an official might sit as judge presiding over, say, the Olympic Games, or other contests. This designation was also used to indicate the place where other types of judgments were rendered. It is said that Pilate sat on a bema seat when he judge Jesus. The Hebrews had such a platform, which is pronounced the same, as is bema, but they spelled it bimah. It was the raised platform in the synagogue on which the rabbi would stand and speak. Jesus probably spoke from such a binah when He read from Isaiah 61, as recorded in Luke 4:18.

As I have mused about this judgment that will take place in heaven as Jesus sits there on the bema seat, I picture a long table in front of Him, and the newly arrived soul/spirit standing there in humble awe, and in eager anticipation of what Jesus will say. As I visualize it, laid out before Jesus on the table will be the record of every thought action and deed that ever occurred from the moment that person was justified until he or she let out their last breath of mortal life. In this picture, I see Jesus examining every item and judging its quality. Scripture tells us that all of our works will be tried by fire because each will have either a sustaining or a perishable quality. {See 1 Corinthians 3:12-15} The analogy used is that it will be either gold, which can withstand the fire of judgment, or it will be hay and “stubble” which will burn to worthlessness. Those thoughts, actions and deeds that survive Jesus’ judgment, the golden ones, will benefit the “winner” throughout eternity and be a determining factor regarding one’s position in the eternal hierarchy. Scripture refers to these as crowns or prizes. That image is carried even further when it speaks of some of the “winners” as being kings and priests in the heavenly realm.

All of this can be very exciting to the saved souls, those persons who muse regarding their manner of eternal service to our Lord. However, there are a few things to be aware

of before we let our expectations soar too high. First, there is that issue of the quality of our “works.” How many of what we ourselves have considered gold worthy, will He judge the same way? Our deceiving and desperately wicked natural hearts do not go away just because God has given us new hearts along with the Holy Spirit to guide us. We very easily quench the Holy Spirit and when we do, the restraint on that natural heart is removed and deception reigns. We don’t necessarily rediscover all truth when we allow our new hearts to again dominate. This is especially true if our knowledge of Scripture, God’s Holy and inerrant Word, is less than it needs to be to have a clear understanding of just what constitutes the gold verses the hay and stubble kind of works. I believe that even the most astute observer and analyzer of the heart, one who is exceedingly well versed in Scripture will stand in tearful regret and disappointment as to what Jesus will declare regarding his or her works. Scripture tells us there will be tears in heaven. While it does not speak of tears in this context, surely at least a tearful countenance can be expected in the hearts of many who will stand there before Him. Why should there be tears or sadness at this momentous event? We are saved souls! As the body died, the soul entered heaven not Hades! Here we are in front of our precious wonderful Lord and Savior, the one in whom we believed and who delivered us to His eternal presence. How can we possibly ever again have a sad or tearful moment? Perhaps we have here the reasons. There are at least five reasons why we may shed tears:

1. As Jesus’ examines our many thoughts, actions and deeds, He will reveal to us what was in our hearts and what motivated us. Works done out of guilt or out of a desire for earthly praise and recognition, or any other reason that did not come through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit will not survive the fire of judgment. We will see every fault and weakness of our own assessments of our deeds.
2. Among the “notes” that Jesus has taken, as He observed our lives, will be a list of lost opportunities. How many times did He present us with chances to glorify His name by helping the needy, comforting the sick, and witnessing to seekers, and potential seekers? These were times when we could have earned golden crowns that would have been, but will never, be ours. Surely these will be tearful moments when we see how many opportunities to serve Him, we actually lost.

3. How often have our prayers been hallow and worthless because they were rote, or hurried, or were offered up to avoid guilt, rather than soul searched expressions of worship, gratitude and a sincere desire for loving communication with Him. Here shame will be mixed with tears.

4. We are likely to hear a list of unconfessed sins, not only those we carelessly “forgot” but also unknown sins, sin about which we could have and should have known and avoided had we studied and better understood His Word. The Hebrews of old had a special sacrifice just for such sins. They had far more excuses to be unaware of the full spectrum of sins than we have today, given that we have copies of the whole Word of God readily available to everyone in this country.

5. Then also Jesus will call our attention of the many misappropriations of our money, time and efforts, which we believed, were righteously utilized but instead supported useless causes. The world has assembled innumerable “causes” wonderful sounding agencies to which we are most cleverly induced to contribute out of a sense of decency righteousness and compassion. The professionals who promote these causes are masters in the psychology of guilt. Lacking it is made to seem like sin, and participation, a great virtue. When we respond in great sincerity and love, to these seemingly worthy causes by supplying time, effort and or money, aren’t we setting up crowns for ourselves? Perhaps, if the cause can pass this simple test. Is there clear evidence that Jesus is involved and that His purpose is being served? If He is not involved than neither are there any golden crowns to be had, no matter how sincere and dedicated the effort. For these efforts, hay and stubble is all one should expect to find displayed on the “bema table.” Giving to a cause should not be on the basis of need, but only on the basis of Jesus’ presence in the activity. We must be extremely careful to discern whether or not the Creator God Jesus is the God that is involved. Many “causes” claim to have Godly merit. One must remember however, that in this world there

are many gods being served, and these often are cleverly disguised as God, or even as Jesus. We must be certain that the real Biblical Jesus is the God of the cause. This discernment comes only from the prayers and the biblical knowledge of a saved soul.

When we think about this cannot we already feel like crying as we recall and recognize how often we have already failed in these ways?

Scripture also provides another bit of caution regarding this matter when in Revelation 3:11 Jesus tells the people of the church of Philadelphia to “...*hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.*” Here is evidence that crowns can be lost. This is not speaking of any hay and stubble crowns for these were never real crowns, but it speaks of genuine golden crowns, rewards that have eternal benefit to the soul. Paul speaks of the crown of rejoicing in 1Thessalonians 2:19 and crowns of righteousness in 2Timothy 4:8. The crown of life is spoken of in James 1:12 and Revelation 2:10, and Peter speaks of the crown of glory in 1Peter 5:4. How does that work? If you have genuinely earned an indestructible crown, how can it be lost? Such a crown is real; it may have past God’s most severe and righteous test. To say we can lose it is to say that God will take it away, discredit it from our inventory of earned crowns. Why? How can anyone lose a genuine golden crown that one has earned and that belongs to that saved soul?

To put the importance of this into proper perspective, if Jesus’ warning didn’t do it, look at what Paul says in 1Corinthians 9:26, 27 “*I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air; but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection; lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.*”

What does Paul mean, becoming a castaway? The Greek word is *adokimos*, which can also mean unapproved, rejected, and worthless. Could anyone such as Paul be judged by God as worthless, rejected, a castaway? Yet we see here that this is exactly what he feared could become of him! In 1 Corinthians 9:24 “*Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain.*” He speaks of

running the race for the prize. He does this also in Philippians 3:14 *“I press toward to mark for the prize...”* In Hebrew 12:1 Where he says, *“.....and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,”* he again speaks of running with perseverance. Paul is speaking of crowns! He fears losing his crowns! It's all about crowns! If losing crowns was that important to Paul, than we should all sit up and take notice! It's not a trivial matter, or the Holy Spirit would not have infused Paul's heart with such concern, nor would He have inserted these admonitions in Scripture for our learning and for our eternal benefit, if only we will understand and appreciate these things.

Realize again that this has nothing to do with salvation. This discussion and Paul's concerns have to do with heavenly rewards for good works. It seems likely that the answer as to how one can lose crowns centers primarily around one word: backsliding! Backsliding I believe can take place under a variety of conditions that result in the loss of a crown or crowns. One such situation might be called pride of grace. There is great vulnerability to this when one has been greatly blessed, such as was Paul. While the only proper response to blessings should be humility and sincere gratitude to our wonderful God, His grace sometimes becomes a source of pride. Perhaps that was what Paul may have feared, given how much he was revered and praised by converts wherever he went. Only God knows just how disastrous this is to one's crown score, but surely pride and self-esteem, depending on the duration and intensity, can work toward the negating or losing of crowns. In Isaiah 39, chapter 38, we read of Hezekiah's folly. He was a good God-fearing King who was dying of a terminal cancer; God heard his prayers, healing him and granted him 15 more years. It appears that his humility and gratitude soon turned into pride of grace and for a short time pride was able to consume him and override his humility. Only God knows what the penalty was in terms of lost crowns.

Weakness in the knowledge of God's Word can lead down many precipitous paths, such as following and being influenced by false teachers whereby crown-losing backsliding thoughts, actions and deeds can occur. Jesus and each of the writers of the New Testament warned repeatedly of how in the last days there would be false teachers,

pastors, and prophets who would deceive with half truths and lies. They would be exceedingly persuasive and able to lull the souls of many to spiritual sleep, or into false beliefs. Some of these would unintentionally do so out of simple ignorance of Scripture. With others it would be deliberate. These evil ones quote Scripture and have the appearances of wisdom, honesty and pious demeanor, yet their messages never ring of a true presentation of what God's word is all about. Those of us who fail to steep ourselves in His word, and fail to discern between truth and half-truth, or cleverly disguised pseudo-truth will surely suffer great loss. If, by virtue of God's infinite mercy and love, such, victimized persons have the faith through which the grace of salvation is confirmed, they are most certainly potential losers of the crowns they may have acquired. It's likely that this is some of what Jesus has in mind when He cautioned the Church of Philadelphia.

The persuasiveness of false teachers combined with exposure and acquiescence to carnal temptations can lead the spiritually weakened into a falling away, a backsliding into any number of thoughts and activities contrary to God's will. This I believe is also what Jesus had in mind when He cautioned His own as He spoke to the Church of Philadelphia. In today's world of abject decadence, Satan seems to be more successful than ever before in bring down in these manners, even the strongest most fruitful saints. I saw this happen to one whom I believe was one of our Lord's most fruitful selfless and dedicated disciples. After being weakened from long days and years of exceedingly faithful service to our Lord, cleaver deceivers surrounded her with many subtle temptations initiating a backsliding that gained momentum, and became almost precipitous. Our Lord in His mercy took her home early, just short of her 51st year of life. I believe she acquired a large number of gold crowns, but lost so many in her short period of backsliding that He hastened to take her home, while she yet had a few left.

I could ramble much more on this topic and many good sermons could and should be preached about the subject of crowns, how to earn them and how to lose them, but I doubt that you will ever hear them from the modern pulpit or hardly anywhere else. Instead I'll now complete this paper with some thoughts that Dr. Chuck Missler recently

mentioned in one of his weekly discussion regarding the Book of Romans. He spoke of the different categories of our earthly conduct that Jesus might consider as we stand before Him at that momentous judgment. To presume that we understand the mind of God sufficiently to know all of His thoughts in this matter is not even remotely suggested. However, Scripture does give us some clues as to what He will consider of importance. Here are what may be twelve of them:

1. How faithfully persistently and zealously did we apply our God given spiritual gifts in His service? All saved souls have spiritual gifts, which we are to discover and utilize in glorifying His name. We are not speaking here of talents such as musical, oratory, or writing skills. These of course are God-given in the sense that everything we are is from Him. These are not the gifts of the spirit Scripture mentions. As noted earlier, in 1 Corinthians 12, and 1 Peter 4 we find some of these gifts identified. These are the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, healing, prophecy, interpretation, hospitality, charity, administration, and others not as easily identified. We are to search out which of these gifts we have been given and then apply our talents to deliver them up to our Lord through their application.
2. How did we treat other believers? Did we respect and love even those we considered to be the lowliest, weakest and most backslidden? Have we supported them in loving humble friendship, unselfishly, and generously administering to them and to their needs during their times of great stress?
3. How did we exercise our authority over others? When placed in such authority, did we maintain appropriate Christ-like humility, compassion, generosity and fairness, absent the air of dominance or superiority?
4. How did we use our money? We are accountable for our stewardship of all of God's gifts. The tithe already belongs to Him. Only that given our Lord beyond this constitutes giving. Did we waste our money on trinkets, excessive pleasures and other needless pursuits? Did we carefully determine whether it was a genuine Christ-centeredness in the cause to which we gave?

5. How did we spend our time? We are accountable for trivial and nonsensical waste of our time. How vital really were those excursions that pre-empted or subordinated church attendance, Bible study, serious prayer time, expressing gratitude, worship and communion with Him, and the pursuit of our calling. Our time here is short and He has called each of us into service. He has given us the correct amount of time to do what we have been given to do. If we have wasted it, then we will go before Him with an embarrassing and unconscionable deficiency, about which we will be very ashamed.
6. How much did we suffer for Jesus? That's not just suffering, but suffer for Him? Did we avoid revealing our faith to avoid ridicule, exclusion, abuse or punishment? The world hated Him, and as He said they would also hate His own. This is a difficult task. It seems appropriate that we should not deliberately seek pain and suffering in this cause, but on the other hand, we must not compromise our faith, or our assertion of faith, regardless of the consequences. Daniels' friends did not seek the furnace, but they faced it and chose to suffer it rather than in any way compromise their faith. They should be our role models regarding this matter.
7. Have we chosen the right race to run or the ladder to climb as our life's work, avoiding that which deep down we realize was not the one God chose for us? Did we choose our own path without first seeking His guidance, or did we avoid asking for fear of that to which we might be directed? This is not about paths chosen before we are saved. However, after having been saved it may very well be that we may be redirected by God, if we will but listen to Him. And listen we must, if we are to truly be His disciples. Not all callings would necessarily require abandoning an established career. It might mean simply re-ordering our after-work priorities into a greater application of our Spiritual gifts.
8. How effectively have we been in controlling our old nature? It doesn't go away. It remains to tempt and torment. Only through the power of the Holy Spirit, if we will but allow Him, can this old nature be controlled. Satan and the world are continually on the attack cajoling and tempting our souls, seeking to cause backsliding and reducing our effectiveness as disciples. We need the whole

- armor of God to resist this relentless attack. This armor is not made for attacking, but for standing firm in the faith. We are also to avoid temptations, and when necessary, run from them. The old nature will want to stay and play where deadly covetousness, lust and other temptations surround us. None of us are strong enough to withstand such heat for very long, so run we must!
9. How many souls have we witnessed to and tried to bring to Christ Jesus? This isn't a "body count" but an effort count. We are not responsible for the result, but only for the effort. But that simple little observation does not get us off the hook entirely. We are responsible for the quality of that effort as well. It's our duty to seek through prayer, Scripture and the Holy Spirit, God-given wisdom, discernment, knowledge and understanding in all matters, so that our efforts will be of the best quality of which we are capable. If we have this, the visible "body count" will not matter as much as will the legacy of future converts that can result from these efforts.
 10. How effectively have we reacted to temptation? This is covered fairly well in #8. To reiterate however, we must avoid as much as possible, situations where temptation lurks, and if we stumble into them, we must run away as quickly as possible. Sustained temptation is almost completely irresistible to the carnal person and we are all carnal as long as the old nature, that deceitful, wicked heart remains. It is with what I believe to be extremely rare exceptions that the old nature ever quits as long as one lives. Avoid and run, and pray every moment as we do so!
 11. How faithful have we been to the Body of Christ? In one sense, it is a question of faithfulness to oneself, in that all of the redeemed are part of the Body. We are called to be living active members of the Body of Christ, not just weekly pew warmers or simply participants in church activities. As members of the Body, we each have tasks that must be attended to faithfully. As with the human body, if one of its parts is not fulfilling its assigned tasks the whole body suffers from this deficiency. If your heart, liver, kidney or some other body part isn't working, then we are sick. So it is with the Christian Body. We must each be faithful, active, participating, and persevering members of this Body of Christ if it is to be

healthy. Even a cursory look around will tell us, the Body is quite sick in these end times. Let none of us be contributors to that sickness.

12. How faithful have we been to the Word of God? To be faithful to the word of God one must know the word of God. Serious extensive study of Scriptures is the only way to know His Word and thereby become faithful to it! Faithfulness to the Word of God means obedience to His Word. A pre-requisite to obedience is to know what constitutes the Word to which we are to be obedient. That requires a strong working knowledge of Scripture. Once a week exposure to pulpit sound bites, and here-say knowledge of Scriptural fragments won't do it! It is evident as one fellowships with Christians, that Biblical illiteracy is rampant throughout the whole body, with most people not even knowing what essentials there are that they have never even heard of. How can one be faithful to the Word of God when one can't even recognize what it is that one doesn't even know about? Serious Bible study has become almost extinct in many so-called Christian Bodies to the extent that one must fear greatly that the "body" is not a Body at all, but merely a churchianity club. With this observation, we have crossed over to the professor-possessor issue, that is the problem associated with those who merely profess to have the saving faith as compared to those who actually has such a faith. Where God's Word is not well understood, or erroneously understood because of false or half-truth teachers, doubt confusion and great personal tragedies are inevitable. Without beating on this issue any further, it will suffice it to say that here will be another level of tearful response on the Day of Judgment. This is because there are two judgment seats, the bema seat where Gods own will be judged as to their position in the heavenly places, and the post-millennial placed of judgment, where the lost, who will have been residing in hell, will be assigned their places in the lake of fire, which is in the outer darkness. (Revelation 20:13-15).

Well that is about it. The Bema Seat Blues. Every human being will one day stand before Jesus in judgment. Will it be the Bema seat judgment, or the post-millennium judgment? Will you be receiving your assignment in a heavenly place, or a fiery place? If it is from the Bema seat, will your accumulation of crowns warrant Jesus telling you

“Well done my good and faithful servant?” Or will it be from the other place of judgment, from which all will be told something like “Depart from me. I never knew you.” It is all up to you. God’s grace, and a heavenly place are available to all who genuinely believe in Christ Jesus and His work on the cross.