

Parson to Person

2 Corinthians 5 – Part 5

(The Judgment Seat of Christ—Part 2)

“For we must all appear before the [bema] judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10 NKJV).

The “Bema”: A Place of Rewards, for the Believer, Just After the Rapture?

For many believers the “*bema*” is thought of as a place of rewards. This association is connected to the traditional reference of the Olympic Games that occurred in Athens where victors were granted honors and a victor’s crown. However, as we carefully examine the Scriptures, we discover that the “*bema*” is not referenced as related to the games, but is used to describe a place of evaluation and the pronouncements of guilt or innocence. This fact does not exclude the historical truth associated with the games; it is simply an observation of the Biblical usage.

The first reference of “*bema*” in the New Testament is found during the trial of Jesus before His crucifixion. In Matthew’s gospel narrative we read, *“While he [Pilate] was sitting on the judgment seat [bema], his wife sent to him, saying, ‘Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him’”* (Matthew 27:19).

At Pilate’s judgment seat Jesus was under scrutiny. Although Pilate said, *“I find no fault in Him,”* it was there that Pilate commissioned Jesus to crucifixion. In this case I might suggest that Jesus appeared at a “*bema*” on our behalf, in our place.

The event is also recorded in John 19 where we learn that the trial took place in the “*praetorium*” where Pilate sat on his judgment seat (“*bema*”) and gave Jesus the penalty of death. The “*praetorium*” was adjacent to the “*pavement*” where Jesus was beaten, mocked, and led away to be crucified.

The second reference is found in Acts 12 where Herod Agrippa (the first) sat on his throne (*bema*) and following an oratory allowed men to worship him as though he were a god. There he was struck by an angel of the Lord, was eaten by worms, and died.

The third and fourth references are in the book of Acts. In Acts 18 Paul is presented at the “*bema*” in Corinth. In Acts 25 he was taken to the “*bema*” in Caesarea. In both cases, the “*bema*” was not portrayed as a place of reward but of evaluation. Furthermore, it is of note that in Acts 18, “*Sosthenes, a ruler of the synagogue,*” was beaten “*before the judgment seat.*” None would suggest that this beating was a “reward.”

The fifth mention of “*bema*” is found in Romans 14. Here Paul suggests that believers should not be critical of one another over non-salvific matters of conscience. He says, “*But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: ‘As I live, says the LORD, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way. I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean*” (Romans 14:10–14 NKJV).

Herein it is obvious that Paul uses the “*bema*” to suggest a future revelatory event. His use implies that “matters of conscience”

should be left to the Lord and that there is a day in the future when questions about these matters will be settled. Of interest is the fact that Paul cites a passage from Isaiah 45 to support his position.

In Isaiah 45 the context includes God's defense of the fact that He alone is God and there is no other! To this end He says that every knee shall bow and every tongue shall *"take an oath"* in support of this truth. Moreover, He says that those who are in opposition to Him will be ashamed and that those who are justified will glory. Therefore, once again we see that the *"bema"* is not referenced simply as reward centric, but is evaluatory and revelatory. The fact that Paul places this event as future suggests a revelation the believer has yet to experience in its fullness. However, inasmuch as the revelation will be a blessing to the believer, it is not named a *"reward"* as such. It should also be noted that in this text Paul did not say exactly when this event will occur—and certainly did not imply that it will only occur just after the Rapture.

The sixth and final mention of *"bema"* is related to ministry fatigue and Paul's encouragement to perseverance. We find this in 2 Corinthians 5. In this case, Paul shows that his interest in persevering ministry is that of *"persuading men"* (vs. 11). He said, *"...we must all appear before the judgment seat [bema] of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad"* (2 Corinthians 5:10 NKJV).

The context not only suggests evaluatory and revelatory examination but overtly avoids the concept of the event being focused singularly on rewards. He said, *"that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad"* (vs. 10b). Therefore, *"good"* might be rewarded but *"bad"* certainly not. Furthermore, *"bad"* does not imply less than good, or short of best, as has often been proposed. It can be shown that the word for *"bad"* (*"κακός," kakov*) is translated as *"evil"* 42 of

51 times, and as “*bad*” in only 1 out of the 51 occurrences. Otherwise it is translated as “foul,” “evil things,” or “wicked,” 1 time each, and as “harm” 5 times. Therefore, Paul must be indicating that the “*bema*” is an event where “*good*” may be rewarded but also where “*bad*” is remembered and accounted for.

By taking these six Biblical references of “*bema*” into account, it is obvious that no recipient in the first-century Church (or otherwise) would have interpreted “*bema*” to suggest a place of reward alone. All those in Athens, Corinth, Caesarea, etc., would have understood that the “*bema*” was a place of evaluation and pronouncement of right or wrong, failure or victory, good or bad; and as we have seen for Jesus, Herod Agrippa I, and Sosthenes, it was a place of punishment.

Reward for the Believer—Condemnation for the Damned

A misunderstanding of the proper Biblical view of “*the judgment seat of Christ*” has diminished the greatness of Christ’s work at the cross, has muddied the true Gospel, and has given room to a performance-driven Christianity. It has caused many Christians to deal with feelings of fear or anxiety about death and their future interchange with the Lord.

As a pastor, I have seen the first-hand effects a weak view of the cross has fostered. The fruit is unbiblical, unhealthy, and heartbreaking. Therefore, a rethinking of the “*bema*” is needed.

It is clear to me that the “*bema*” is a place of rewards for the believer—but a place of condemnatory judgment for those who reject the Lord.

Thus, Paul wrote of the “*bema*” as motivation and perseverance in ministry.

“Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences”
(2 Corinthians 5:9–11).

Context is everything!

I love you all,
Pastor Paul