

What About the "BEMA Seat Judgment?"

The Evangelical World often makes reference to a Term which the Church of God, for the most part, is not familiar with. What IS the BEMA Seat, how does it differ from the White Throne Judgment and how does this particular "judgment" correlate with our understanding of a Christian's Destiny?

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The Bema Seat and the Great White Throne Judgments are recognized in Protestant Evangelical / Fundamentalist views as distinct and separate 'sentencing' appearances. Though not a familiar term among the Church of God genre, it is a matter we should be aware of, at least for sake of holding up our end in a discussion, and to reinforce what we understand about "Judgment Day"

A Believer's Question:

Explain the difference between the Judgment Seat of Christ, where and when it takes place and what happens there, and the Great White Throne of Judgment. It is noteworthy here that the person asking recognizes the difference between these two terms. However, not being familiar with God's PLAN of Redemption, Fundamentalists place them incorrectly, as we will see in this pastor's response.

Answer: The Bema Seat Judgment of Christ takes place in Heaven right after the Rapture and is to award crowns to Church Age believers for the things we've done while on Earth. It's described in 1st Cor. 3:10-15 and other places. The timing of this, of course, is obviously incorrect, in that the "Rapture Event", as commonly posed, actually occurs AFTER the Great Tribulation at the Second Coming in which all deceased Saints, together with those remaining alive, are raised together at one moment into their "incorruptible" form and who descend to the Mount of Olives with Christ on that same day (already in their Spirit bodies). (Zech. 14:4) Saints are exempted from "judgment" in the usual sense, (Jn. 5:24 & Rev. 20:6) having already been pre-assigned to Life beforehand.

They don't stand before Christ for sentencing, but it is logical that there will be some form of Awards or Coronation Ceremony shortly afterward in which they will receive their appropriate assignments in the Millennial Kingdom. It's interesting to note that this pastor, answering, realizes that the Bema Seat event does not occur on an ongoing basis, as each person dies (and their soul supposedly ascends to Heaven). It is correct that it will be at a particular time, with all in it standing together, but they misplace its location and timing on account of their incomplete understandings of the purposes of and timing of each of the resurrections.

"Great White Throne" is Later!

Answer continued: The Great White Throne Judgment comes at the end of the Millennium and is meant for unbelievers of all ages. They'll be judged by their works to confirm that their behavior has not been of a high enough standard to warrant entry into the Kingdom. Then they'll be thrown in the Lake of Fire. (Rev. 20:11-15)

Here too, this man's answer is partly correct (in it being after the 1000 years), but the GWT is NOT a sentencing event (that comes later – at the end of it). Most people regard judgment as a sentencing event, not in its evaluative aspect. In any judgment, there must be an evidentiary phase.

The Great White Throne (being after the 1000 year millennium) involves a second resurrection (Rev. 20:5) and provides the period of opportunity for those who never had opportunity in their natural lifetimes. This is their evidentiary period, in which they establish their worthiness for inclusion into

the Family of God by living by the “books” which are then opened to their understanding! Previously, they were not given understanding. (Rev. 20:12)

An Era, Not a Day

The Great White Throne is the term for the second resurrection era, which lasts a generation – long enough for all in it to complete a lifetime – but not so long they would again die natural deaths. The record or results of their conversion experience (or failure thereat) is when all are brought to Final Sentencing at the White Cloud harvesting / Grapes of Wrath event graphically described in Revelation 14. In this scene, ALL of the dead (and those still living) will stand alive, still physical, to receive appropriate sentencing, either LIFE or DEATH. This is the JUDGMENT spoken of in Matthew 25:31-46 and elsewhere.

Two Separate “Judgments”

The following, presented in bold italic, is from a discussion of the subject found on the internet:

By Fred Belcher Jr *“The judgment seat of Christ mentioned in 2nd Corinthians 5:10 and the judgment seat of God mentioned in Romans 14:10 are both different from the Great White Throne Judgement in Revelation 20:11... and for good reason, which will be explained.*

The “seat” mentioned in Romans and 2nd Corinthians comes from the Greek word “bema” and it merely denotes a raised platform. More importantly, at this particular judgment there are ONLY saved believers present! This is the time, after we saints have either been resurrected or transformed to our new bodies, that each one of us will have our works / behaviors as Christians judged. It is described further in 1st Corinthians 3:8 & 13-15 (New American Standard):

13. “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. 14. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. 15. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.” (End of quotation)

Notice that at this ‘judgment’ it is a matter of whether ‘rewards’ will be received or not ... the individual’s life and being saved are never in

question; whereas, at the Great White Throne Judgment it is a question of LIFE or DEATH!

No acts BEFORE we were called and saved will be considered ... those previous acts were totally done away with and paid for at our conversion because of Christ’s sacrifice!

This is the occasion when each Christian will either be rewarded in some fashion or lose some reward(s) in some fashion. THERE IS NO CONDEMNATION FOR ANY OF US AT THIS TIME! We will be in our overwhelmingly joyous and glorified state with our Christ-like celestial bodies (Philippians 3:21) which we will inherit as being in the “first resurrection” (Revelation 20:4-6); it is just a time when we are evaluated in TOTAL LOVE by God and Christ to either lose or receive Rewards accordingly. We will wholeheartedly agree with the outcome and accept any gain or loss with gratitude.

Conversely, a true believer / saint will NEVER appear before the Great White Throne Judgment ... we will have already inherited our glorified bodies (Philippians 3:21; Revelation 20:4&6). Only non-believers (those who have never heard of Christ as well as infants and babies) and unbelievers appear before the White Throne.”

Important Distinctions

Not being aware of Mr. Belcher’s particular religious persuasion, I find his explanations exhibit an awareness of the fact that converted Saints (those in possession of God’s Spirit) are exempted from the later Judgment – both evaluation and sentencing – which will involve all other individuals. The Saints appearance before Christ will more resemble an “**Awards Ceremony**”, (perhaps better referred to as a Rewards Ceremony) where the issue will be a review of each Christian’s life-accomplishments and the determination of an appropriate position in the New World Government. In this area, not all will be found to have accomplished equally commendable or equally profitable works.

However, it appears from his explanation that he might not comprehend the real purpose of the “White Throne Judgment”. Typically among the Evangelical persuasions, the GWT is presented as the ultimate Sentencing Event at ‘the end of the

world'. More correctly, it is that interval of time when "the rest of the dead" (Rev. 20:5) are raised and then have the books (of the Bible) opened to them.¹ The Book of Life is also held open for the purpose of adding their names into it, pursuant to their being added in time to the Family of God in the Sentencing Event which will take place at the end of this post-millennial era.

The Rest are Raised After 1000 Years!

We can see from the reference to the Book of Life that, at this point, it isn't just to see whose names are in it to find who are converted. The purpose of opening it is to ADD their names into it, once they avail themselves of their chance for salvation, now that they are offered the opportunity to do so, which their previous lifetimes didn't provide them.

The White Throne Judgment period is not for the purpose of sentencing, it provides them an opportunity which they were not afforded in their original lifetimes. Judgment during this era is for evaluation of the works these resurrected peoples perform. These works form the basis for their sentencing at the conclusion of this time period as Revelation 20:12 shows.

The actual Sentencing Event (Final Judgment) is graphically portrayed in Revelation 14. (Request my article which explains this chapter in detail.)

So, the Bema Seat event involves converted Saints ONLY. Their works do not establish or form the basis of their conversion, but are the major factor determining the particular Reward appropriate to the individual. Not all will receive the same Rewards, though the fact of their change from flesh-to-spirit form is on an equilateral basis. This is something that most Christians fail to fully realize, despite the parables of the Pounds and Talents in Matthew 25:14-30 & Luke 19:13-27.

Unbelievers & Infants!

This explanation offered by Mr. Belcher is also quite interesting in that he provides an answer to

¹ Revelation 20:11-12 "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. 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." (KJV)

the question of what happens with those who died too young to ever have been realistically expected to attain salvation. He breaks from the usual, in that most denominations generously assign them to Heaven, (up to what they deem to be 'the age of accountability') but this man places them in the White Throne Judgement! Is he suggesting they are to be consumed in the Lake of Fire, or does he realize the opportunity denied them and that the GWT provides them the opportunity they never had? It would be interesting to know what he means.

What isn't clear is whether he assigns them to death, or whether he realizes the opportunity that the second resurrection era allows. As he states it, he is correct. This is where the infants and younger children (along with all who died unconverted as a result of inopportunity) will then be restored to physical life for a period of time and be afforded the opportunity to come to know Christ, receive His Spirit, and pursue conversion. Such a situation would obviously involve time, as it does in our day.

Understanding the White Cloud Event

It should be pointed out that those who spurned the opportunity given them in this lifetime will remain in their graves, awaiting the Sentencing Event that we read of in Revelation 14; the White Cloud harvest, etc. The generations from the millennial age and the Great White Throne Judgment period will rise and stand together for Final Sentencing. Those who rejected their opportunity for salvation in this present age will remain in their graves during the second resurrection era (the GWT) and will at last arise and stand for Final Sentencing together with the millennial age generations and those referred to as "the rest of the dead" resurrected after the 1000 years. This Judgment is the sheep-from-the-goats Sentencing Event spoken of so clearly by Christ in Matthew 25:31-46.

While we have, to this point, taken time to explain what the Great White Throne actually is, the less-mentioned consideration within most of our fellowships is what some refer to as the Bema Seat.

Advocating Empty Worship?

While many hard-set evangelical ministries go to extraordinary lengths to discourage believers from the idea that we should keep the Law, emphasizing

a Grace which effectively abolishes the Law, the issue of accumulating a Reward is brushed aside as though it too is irrelevant. Since we cannot earn Salvation, they reason, we should do nothing by way of attempting to earn anything. "It's all done for you, they proclaim! You need do nothing!"

Let's understand that this particular Bema Seat event doesn't address the issue of Salvation or the absence thereof. It's pre-established that a person who is brought before the Judgment Seat of Christ is a converted person. The issue here is the Reward factor that each of us should have accrued.

Let's consider more from the internet on this subject of the Bema Seat:

One of the prominent doctrines of the New Testament is the Doctrine of Rewards and the Judgment Seat of Christ. It is a doctrine often ignored or, when taught, it is misrepresented because of the term "judgment" that is used in translating the Greek text. Commenting on this Dr. Samuel Hoyt² writes:

"Within the church today there exists considerable confusion and debate regarding the exact nature of the examination at the judgment seat of Christ. The expression "the judgment seat of Christ" in the English Bible has tended to cause some to draw the wrong conclusion about the nature and purpose of this evaluation. A common misconception which arises from this English translation is that God will mete out a just retribution for sins in the believer's life, and some measure of retributive punishment for sins will result.

Though it's tremendously serious with eternal ramifications, the judgment seat of Christ is not a place and time when the Lord will mete out punishment for sins committed by the child of God. Rather, it is a place where rewards will be given or lost depending on how one has used his or her life for the Lord.

In 1st Thessalonians 2:19-20, the Apostle Paul drew courage and was motivated by the fact of rewards at the return of the Lord for the church which he mentions in every chapter in this epistle and becomes the primary subject of 2nd Thessalonians. The Lord's return and what this means not only to the world but to us individually is a very prominent subject of the New Testament."

² Dr. Samuel L. Hoyt, Professor of Systematic Theology, at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary.

It is significant that among the final words of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, we find these words of the Lord:

Revelation 22:12 "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done."

While salvation is a gift, there are rewards given for faithfulness in the Christian life and loss of rewards for unfaithfulness. Rewards become one of the great motives of the Christian's life or should be. But we need to understand the nature of these rewards to understand the nature of the motivation. Some people are troubled by the doctrine of rewards because this seems to suggest "merit" instead of "grace," and because, it is pointed out, we should only serve the Lord out of love and for God's glory.

Of course we should serve the Lord out of love and for God's glory, while understanding the nature of rewards will help us do that. But the fact still remains that the Bible promises us rewards. God gives us salvation. It is a gift thru faith, but He rewards us for good works. God graciously supplies the means by which we may serve Him. Indeed, He works in us both to will and to do as we volitionally appropriate His grace (Phil. 2:12-13), but the decision to serve, and the diligence employed in doing so, are our responsibility and our contribution and God sees this as rewardable. Compare the following passages:

1st Corinthians 15:10 "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me."

Is Paul alleging here that Grace, under its fullest expression, actually facilitates Works? The following verse supports the same premise.

Colossians 1:29 "And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me."

Reward Represents MERIT

Matthew 16:27 "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

Other Key Verses on Rewards: Romans 14:10-12; 2nd Corinthians 5:9-10; 1st John 2:28.

*1st Corinthians 3:8 & 13-15 “Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. ... Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but **he himself shall be saved**; yet so as by fire.*

What we see in these passages emphatically affirms the premise of this article, that our Works determine our level of Reward, they are not the basis for determining Salvation itself. We can also see that a person might have ‘his accomplishments’ burned up in refining fire, while still retaining his Salvation.

Both Romans 14:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:9 speak of the “judgment seat.” This is a translation of one Greek word, the word bema. While bema is used in the gospels and Acts of a raised platform where a Roman magistrate or ruler sat to make decisions and pass sentence (Matt. 27:19; John 19:13), its use in the epistles by Paul, because of his many allusions to the Greek athletic contests, is more in keeping with its original use among the Greeks.

This word was taken from Isthmian games where the contestants would compete for the prize under the careful scrutiny of judges who would make sure that every rule of the contest was obeyed (cf. 2 Timothy 2:5). The victor of a given event who participated according to the rules was led by the judge to the platform called the Bema. There the laurel wreath was placed on his head as a symbol of victory (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:24-25).

In all of these passages, “Paul was picturing the believer as a competitor in a spiritual contest. As the victorious Grecian athlete appeared before the Bema to receive his perishable award, so the Christian will appear before Christ’s Bema to receive his imperishable award. The judge at the Bema bestowed rewards to the victors. He did not whip the losers.” We might add, neither did he sentence them to hard labor.

In other words, it is a reward seat and portrays a time of rewards or loss of rewards following examination, but it is not a time of punishment where believers are judged for their sins. Such would be inconsistent with the finished work of

Christ on the Cross because He totally paid the penalty for our sins. Chafer and Walvoord ³ have an excellent word on this view:

After the Last Trump!

This event will occur immediately following the Second Coming and the resurrection of the Church after it is caught up to be with the Lord in the air as described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

(1) In Luke 14:12-14, reward is associated with the resurrection and the Second Coming is when the Church is resurrected.


(2) In Revelation 19:8, when the Lord returns with His bride at the end of the Tribulation, she is seen already rewarded. Her reward is described as fine linen, the righteous acts of the saints – undoubtedly the result of Rewards.

(3) In 2nd Timothy 4:8 and 1 Corinthians 4:5, Rewards are associated with “that day” and with the Lord’s coming. Again, for the Church this means the event of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

(4) In 1st John 2:28 establishes when we will first appear before the Lord.

Confirming the Distinction

Our appearance before Christ’s Judgment Seat is confirmed as a separate event from the Final Sentencing of the righteous and of the wicked that we read of in other places. At issue is the appropriate Reward we will be entitled to receive based on the accomplishments we accrue by the leading and empowerment of God’s Spirit.

What is also noteworthy is that these evangelicals recognize that our appearance does not occur at the times of our individual deaths, as a “Heaven & Hell” belief system would require! 

³ With reference to sin, Scripture teaches that the child of God under grace shall not come into judgment (John 3:18; 5:24; 6:37; Rom. 5:1; 8:1; 1 Cor. 11:32); in his standing before God, and on the ground that the penalty for all sin — past, present, and future (Col. 2:13) — has been borne by Christ as the perfect Substitute, the believer is not only placed beyond condemnation, but being in Christ is accepted in the perfection of Christ (1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:6; Col. 2:10; Heb. 10:14) and loved of God as Christ is loved (John 17:23).

Again, Chafer writes concerning the *Bema*, “It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the judgment is unrelated to the problem of sin, that it is more for the bestowing of rewards than the rejection of failure.”