

AN ANALYSIS OF SIN IN RELATION TO THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST

by

Richard R. Penix

A paper

submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the course
THD 661 Systematic Theology III
Northland International University

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	ii
INTRODUCTION	3
KEY TEXTS ON THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST	3
I Corinthians 3:11-15	4
Believers Evaluated By How They Build On Christ's Foundation	4
A Day of Testing Is Certain	5
Work Evaluated and Justly Rewarded	6
2 Corinthians 5:1-10	7
Understanding the Βημα Seat Judgment	8
Motivation from The Βημα Seat Judgment.....	9
THEOLOGICAL TENSION CONCERNING REMOVAL OF SIN.....	9
The Judicial Removal of Sin	10
The Familial Retention of Sin	10
CONCLUSION	11
BIBLIOGRAPHY	13

AN ANALYSIS OF SIN IN RELATION TO THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST

Introduction

The Judgment Seat of Christ is an eschatological event that strikes fear in the hearts of many genuine believers. Aside from the discussion on when this event will occur, there is a much bigger theological dilemma that must be addressed. That dilemma involves reconciling how precisely a believer will answer for his sin when he stands before Jesus Christ to give an account of his life.

If the gospel absolves sinful men and women of their guilt before a holy God, only to supply them with the forensic righteousness of Jesus Christ, how is one to understand a judgment that seemingly conducts a re-trial of those very sins? Even if this judgment is not intended to be a horrific event for believers, how does it not, at least in some way, mitigate the numerous passages referring to God's choice to not remember a Christian's sin any more? It is the intent of this paper to argue that while judgment is certain, a believer has no reason to fear divine shame or rejection when he or she stands before Christ to give account of his or her life.

Key Texts On The Judgment Seat of Christ

The Judgment Seat of Christ is implied throughout the New Testament, but only a few Pauline texts address it at length. For the purposes of this paper, only two of the

most load-bearing texts that address this judgment of believers will be evaluated. The following two texts provide possibly the strongest support for a divine accounting in which all true believers will participate: I Corinthians 3:11-15 and 2 Corinthians 5:10.

I Corinthians 3:11-15

The primary concern of this text is how the church builds on the foundation that has been laid, namely Jesus Christ. Gordon Fee writes, “The foundation is not proper doctrine, the concern of a later period, but the gospel itself, with its basic content of salvation through Jesus Christ.”¹ Since the foundation is the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul is concerned that the Corinthians not revert back to “*sophia*” in an effort to improve upon the very foundation of the church. The seriousness of changing the gospel moves Paul to discuss a believer’s accounting of his actions before Jesus Christ.²

Believers Evaluated By How They Build On Christ’s Foundation

Believers are to give careful attention to the materials they use in building on the foundation. Using the imagery of a building, verses 12-13 address the materials in

¹Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 139.

²Concerning the preeminence of Jesus Christ in being the sure and unrivaled foundation of the church, Leon Morris writes, “There is only one possible foundation and that is already laid, namely Jesus Christ. No-one can begin anywhere else, a truth still worthy of emphasis in the light of attempts to build ‘Christianity’ without Christ, on a foundation of good works, or humanism, or the like.” Leon Morris, *I Corinthians*. TNTC. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985.), p. 65.

which a believer should and should not use.³ Gold, silver, and precious stones are examples of materials that will last when tested with fire. On the contrary, wood, hay, and straw will be quickly consumed. The focus is not so much on the building itself, but on those who are doing the building.

A Day of Testing Is Certain

It is clear from the context that Paul is not addressing unbelievers; he is speaking to believers who will give an account of how they built on Christ. In no uncertain terms, Paul addresses the coming day of accounting. Leon Morris accurately states of verse 13, “There will come a time of testing for all we build... That day is often referred to in terms of the believer’s joy at being united to the Lord. But it will also be a time when the work God’s people have done will be judged.” Verse 13 teaches that this “Day” will “reveal by fire “which sort of work each one has done.”

In what sense is “fire” to be understood in this passage? Anthony Thiselton writes, “the verb δοκιμάζω should be thought of as that which discloses definitive approval (or otherwise) in the sense of a disclosure of all the factors.”⁴ Rather than purifying something to make it whole, this fire will expose the authenticity of the believer’s works. With added clarity, Morris writes, “The picture is that of fire sweeping

³Concerning the importance of building correctly, Fee writes, “The point is that the quality of the superstructure must be appropriate to the foundation.” Since there is no greater foundation than Jesus Christ, a believer’s works must be congruent to such a foundation. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 140.

⁴Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. NIGTC. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 313.

through a building. It consumes what is combustible, but leaves metal and stone. The quality of the work will be shown."⁵

Work Evaluated and Justly Rewarded

Verses 14-15 should cause believers to pause and evaluate the weight of this eschatological reality. Rewards await all Christians who build their lives on the true foundation, the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁶ Those who build their lives and ministries on human personality, wisdom, rhetorical flourish, or anything else forfeit their rewards when they stand before Christ.⁷ Instead, they will be saved, "through fire." This is a proverbial expression akin to being saved "by the skin of your teeth."⁸ Leon Morris further elaborates on this point, "The imagery is that of one who has to dash through the flames to escape to safety."⁹

⁵Morris, *I Corinthians*. p. 66.

⁶Linda L. Belleville writes regarding the kind of judgment believers will experience, "Paul's intention is to remind the Corinthians that all those who serve Christ will have to give an account of what they have accomplished for the Lord, not how they have increased their own reputation." Linda L. Belleville, *2 Corinthians*. IVPNTCS (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 142.

⁷Morris writes, "All those considered here are saved, for they have built on the one foundation, Jesus Christ. Even of the one whose work is burnt up it is said that he himself will be saved. The distinction is not between the lost and saved, but among the saved between those who have built well and those who have built poorly." *Ibid.*

⁸With helpful insight regarding the phrase "he himself will be saved, but only as through fire," Alan F. Johnson writes, "Ill-advised, misdirected Christian ministry will be weighed and found wanting. Those who have so constructed will suffer loss of praise from Christ (4:5); because salvation is based on grace, not works, they will be saved, yet as if by the skin of their teeth." Alan F. Johnson, *I Corinthians*. IVPNTCS (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 74.

⁹Morris, *I Corinthians*, p. 67.

One should not accuse the Apostle Paul of advocating works salvation. Furthermore, because the Corinthian mindset was in such theological shipwreck, Paul sought to strongly emphasize the necessity of living a life that matched the integrity and stability of the foundation that had been laid by Jesus Christ. The judgment addressed in this text should not be understood as a determiner of eternal destiny.

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

This beginning of chapter 5 is dominated with the Apostle Paul's desire to be united physically and personally with the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 1 teaches that a believer does not have to fear what will happen if his "earthly home is destroyed," for he has been given a future "building from God" that is "eternal in the heavens." Verses 2-4 explain Paul's desire to be fully clothed by the final resurrection when he will in every way enjoy eternal life with God. Verse 5 demonstrates how this future reality is guaranteed to believers by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Verses 6-9 continue Paul's theme of desiring to be free from this sin-stained body and at home with the Lord. Twice he mentions that he is of "good courage" and in verse 7 he states, "for we walk by faith, not by sight." Succinctly, Paul writes in verse 9, "whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please the Lord."¹⁰ Paul expresses a similar sentiment in Romans 14:8 when he writes, "For if we live, we live to

¹⁰Paul Barnett writes, "To 'please the Lord' well summarizes the Christian's life, and is to be understood as doing good and avoiding evil. There is no hint, however, that the believers' motive in pleasing the Lord is to accumulate merit or dominical favor. (vv. 6,8; cf.v.1). Rather, it is a desire that springs from the joyous prospect of being 'with the Lord' (v.8) and reflects true conversion; one always wishes to please the one he or she loves." Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 273.

the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." This perspective perfectly sets up Paul's brief teaching on the judgment Seat of Christ in verse 10.

Understanding the Βημα Seat Judgment

The use of the word Βημα carried a great deal of connotation to Paul's readers.

Regarding this word's connotative value, Samuel Hoyt writes,

"The historical event that would come to their minds was the Isthmian games. The contestants would compete for the prize under the careful scrutiny of the judges who would make sure that every rule of the contest was obeyed. The victor of a given event who participated according to the rules was led by the judge to the platform called the Βημα. There a laurel wreath was placed on his head as a symbol of victory. Paul was picturing the believer as a competitor in a spiritual contest. As the victorious Grecian athlete appeared before the Βημα to receive his perishable award, so the Christian will appear before Christ's Βημα to receive his imperishable award. The judge at the Βημα bestowed rewards to the victors. *He did not whip the losers.*"¹¹

It is for this reason that those in Paul's day would have understood the Βημα not as a horrific experience involving punishment, but one of receiving rewards commensurate with their work. This judgment will be an evaluation of every deed a believer does in his or her life. Both God-glorifying acts as well as God-diminishing acts will be exposed and scrutinized by Christ Himself.

¹¹Samuel L. Hoyt, "The Judgment Seat of Christ in Theological Perspective Part 1: The Judgment Seat of Christ and Unconfessed Sins" BSAC 137:545 (Jan 1980), p. 37.

Motivation from The Βημα Seat Judgment

The entire tenor of chapter 5 is one of excited anticipation. The apostle is thrilled about the prospect of his eternal home. The Βημα Seat Judgment is not intended to terrorize genuine believers with the thought of public humiliation before all the Heavenly Hosts! If isolated from its context, it may be possible to conclude from verse 10 that Christians should obey God based solely out of fear. This, however, would be to misconstrue the entire passage. Only four verses later (vs. 14), Paul states, “for the love of Christ controls us.” It is Paul’s understanding of the gospel that motivates him in every facet of his life. The awareness of coming judgment is penultimate, at best, to Pauline motivation for ministry faithfulness.

Theological Tension Concerning Removal of Sin

A palpable conflict exists between the Scripture’s teaching on the removal of sin at salvation and the reappearance of those sins when a believer stands before Christ at the Βημα. How does one account for all the passages of Scripture that speak of God placing the sinner’s wickedness behind Him and remembering it no more? How can judgment of believers not be a dreadfully shameful and humiliating experience? Is this to be understood as a believer’s hell, which he must endure before entering heaven? How does this event not detract from Christ’s work on the cross, if God brings back sins for review before finally opening the doors of heaven? These questions and more have been posed concerning this final judgment. It is the intent of the remainder of this

discussion to prove that the notion that the Judgment Seat of Christ will be an experience more like hell than like heaven is theologically in error.

The Judicial Removal of Sin

As stated earlier, it must be clear that the Judgment Seat of Christ will not be a divine evaluation that determines eternal destiny. This judgment is intended to evaluate and reward the faithfulness, or lack thereof, of all God's children. It must not be understood as a trial to find out whose good deeds qualify them for heaven and whose failures disqualify them from eternal life. 2 Corinthians 5:21 clearly states, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Forensic righteousness made possible by Christ's work on the cross is the only hope humanity has for eternal security. Hebrews 8:12 states, "For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." Similarly, Psalm 103:12 states, "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us." The Βημα Seat Judgment need not shake a believer's confidence in the gospel's removal of sin. In no sense does this judgment mitigate Christ's work to expiate the sins of humanity. Judicially, believers are saved for all eternity.

The Familial Retention of Sin

Hebrews 12 assumes God's sovereign awareness of His children's failures and shortcomings. However, this knowledge is to discipline and steer them in a more God-glorifying direction. It would be arrogant for a child of God to retort, "You're not

supposed to discipline me, God! You said you would not remember my sin anymore!” In this case, God is dealing with the believer according to his sin, but not in a judicial sense. As a kind father lovingly corrects his son, so God lovingly corrects His children for the purpose of greater Christlikeness.¹² Though one’s actions will certainly be examined, the Judgment Seat of Christ will involve God relating to His children as a father to his son, rather than a judge to a convict.

Conclusion

The Βῆμα Seat Judgment should not be viewed as a dreaded event for believers.¹³ The overwhelming desire for Christians should be anticipation that a gracious God has showed him mercy and not wrath.¹⁴ As Hoyt notes, “The judgment seat of Christ might be compared to a commencement ceremony. At graduation there is some measure of disappointment and remorse that one did not do better and work harder. However, at

¹²In a similar vein, Hoyt writes, “The New Testament writers frequently exhorted Christians to godly living in light of the necessity of eventually having their lives examined by the Lord... This was a great compelling force in Paul’s life that kept him faithful in the midst of overwhelming obstacles and opposition. As a believer is captured by this truth, he recognizes the importance of living a holy and faithful life now since present fidelity determines future reward.” Samuel L. Hoyt, “The Judgment Seat of Christ in Theological Perspective Part 1: The Judgment Seat of Christ and Unconfessed Sins” BSAC 137:545 (Jan 1980), p. 39.

¹³Wayne Grudem adds helpful insight concerning a believer’s confidence at the Bema when he writes, “It is important to realize that this judgment of believers will be a judgment to evaluate and bestow various degrees of reward, but the fact that they will face such a judgment should never cause believers to fear that they will be eternally condemned.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 1143.

¹⁴Regarding what sense a believer will answer for his sin, Louis Berkhof writes, “But it is sometimes objected that the sins of believers, which are pardoned, certainly will not be published at that time; but Scripture leads us to expect that they will be, though they will, of course, be revealed as *pardoned* sins.” Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932.), p. 732.

such an event the overwhelming emotion is joy, not remorse.”¹⁵ Hoyt aptly summarizes the tension between joy from being with Christ and the sobriety of His inspection when he writes, “To overdo the sorrow aspect of the judgment seat of Christ is to make heaven hell. To underdo the sorrow aspect is to make faithfulness inconsequential.”¹⁶

Even though it is natural to focus on the negative aspects of this judgment, there are also several positive aspects. A believer can take great comfort in the fact that a Sovereign God desires personal, one-on-one time to review his or her faithfulness to Him on this earth. Irregardless of the amount of praise received in this life, one should be humbled that the Almighty sees all that is done and will distribute rewards in due time. When viewed from this angle, the experience becomes one of the most precious, anticipated events in all of Scripture. A believer may have stalwart confidence that the promises of God in the gospel will ring true on that final day. Justification for sin has been provided by Christ Himself and eternal joy is absolutely certain.

¹⁵Samuel L. Hoyt, “The Judgment Seat of Christ in Theological Perspective Part 2: The Negative Aspects of the Christian’s Judgment” BSAC 137:546 (Apr 1980), p. 131.

¹⁶Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abernathy, David. *An Exegetical Summary of 2 Corinthians*. Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008.
- Barnett, Paul. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997.
- Belleville, Linda L. *2 Corinthians*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. ed. Grant R. Osbourne. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
- Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1938.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Publishing, 1998.
- Fee, Gordon D. *I Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987.
- Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1994.
- Hoyt, Samuel L. "The Judgment Seat of Christ in Theological Perspective Part 1: The Judgment Seat of Christ and Unconfessed Sins" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137:545. January 1980.
- _____. "The Judgment Seat of Christ in Theological Perspective Part 2: The Negative Aspects of the Christian's Judgment" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137:546. April 1980.
- Johnson, Alan F. *I Corinthians*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. ed. Grant R. Osbourne. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
- Kruse, Colin G. *2 Corinthians*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987.
- Mare, Harold W. *I Corinthians*. The Expositor's Bible Commentary. vol. 10. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976.
- Morris, Leon. *I Corinthians*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1985.

Thiselton, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. ed. Marshall and Hagner. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000.