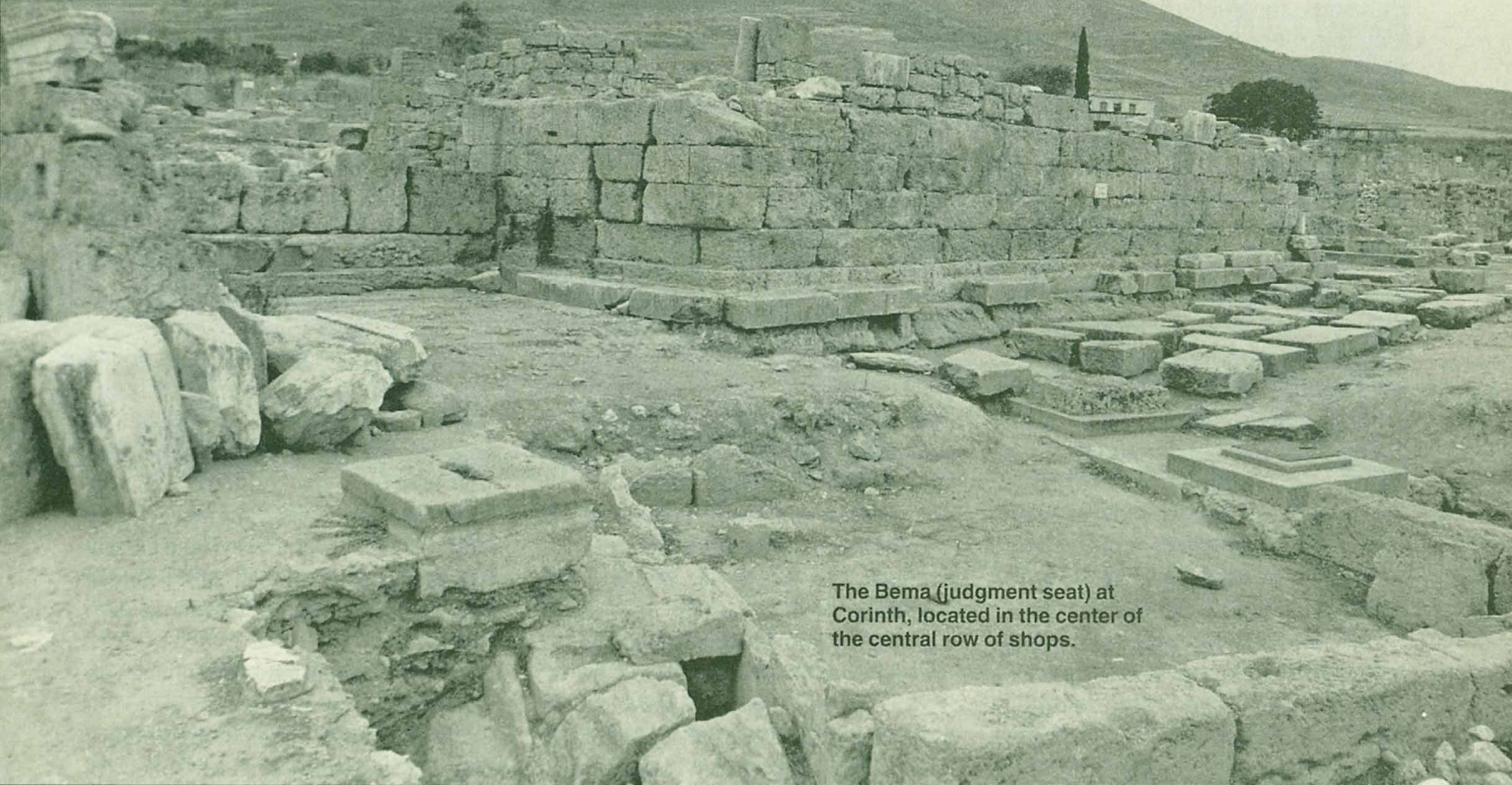


THE JUDGMENT SEAT

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The Bema (judgment seat) at Corinth, located in the center of the central row of shops.

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JUDGMENT IS NOT a popular subject for Bible studies. Few people like to preach judgment, and fewer still like for someone to preach judgment. Yet Jesus announced the coming of a day of judgment (Matt. 11:20-24). Paul also spoke clearly: the judgment seat of Christ is a future reality that we all will face (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10). What did Paul mean when he spoke of the judgment seat?

To understand this phrase best, we must look at what it meant in the everyday world of Paul's day.

"Judgment seat" (bema) originally meant "a step or a pace of the foot." For instance, when Stephen preached about Abraham, he said that at first God did not give Abraham any piece of land, not even one as long as a step (bema) of the boot (Acts 7:5).

This word, bema, usually is not used in this literal sense. Quickly the word came to mean a slightly raised platform, that was reached by stepping up several stairs. Often these raised platforms were used to deliver speeches (as we use them today). In Paul's day speakers sat to deliver speeches

so the platform included a seat or bench. For example, Acts 12:21 tells us that Herod sat on a platform (bema) to deliver his infamous speech. Since judges also sat on platforms (bema) to hold court, this word came to mean the seat where the judge sat to hear and decide cases or, a judgment seat. The New Testament frequently uses bema to mean the portable—but quite

Lesson reference:

L&W: 2 Corinthians 4:18—5:10;
Romans 2:3-8; 14:10-12;
1 Corinthians 4:3-5



official—judgment seat (or tribunal) on which Roman officials sat when they were functioning as judges. For example, Jesus was brought before the bema of Pontius Pilate (Matt. 27:19); the Jews accused Paul before the bema of Proconsul Gallio (Acts 18:12); and Paul was tried before the bema of Festus in Caesarea (Acts 25:6). This use of bema for judgment seat gave rise to two common expressions in New Testament Greek: “sitting on the judgment seat,” which means “being a judge” or “judging” (see John 19:13; Acts 25:6,17); and “standing before the judgment seat,” which means “being judged” (Acts 25:10; Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10). Thus when Paul said that we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), he meant that one day we will all be judged by Christ.

In Israel some judges were famous for their corruption. Justice had little or nothing to do with their judgments. So well known was their corruption that Jesus even used one as an example in a parable (Luke 18:1-8). Romans, on the other hand, were famous for their fair and even-handed justice. Thus, Paul chose the image of a Roman judge when he thought of Christ as judge. Paul used the Roman image of a “judgment seat” to picture Christ’s judgment.¹

Most Christians think of a day of judgment as the final judgment at the end of time. Yet the New Testament speaks both of God’s judging in this present time and also of His final judgment. The Gospel of John states that the coming of the kingdom of God in Christ’s ministry causes the world to

be judged even now. Unbelievers are already judged because they refused the Savior. The light has come into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light (John 3:16-21). God’s judgment is already at work in a person’s life in this present age (Rom. 1:18-28; Rev. 18:8).

Thus God’s judgment is both “existential” (at work in a person’s life in this present age) and “eschatological” (coming at the end of time). Although this is true, when the New Testament speaks about “the judgment seat,”² it only means the judgment of God at the end of time. This final judgment is the judgment that is emphasized in the New Testament. This is the judgment that comes at Christ’s return (Matt. 25:31-46). When Christ returns, He Himself will judge the world (John 5:22).

On the last day this present world will be shaken and destroyed (Matt. 24:29,35), and God will create a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). On that day, according to Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:10, we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. The all-seeing God will judge all, including every careless word (Matt. 12:36), our secrets (Rom. 2:16), and even the things that we desired in our hearts to do (Luke 12:2-3). Standing before the judgment seat is as certain and as inescapable as death itself (Rom. 2:3). Even the angels will not escape standing before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6).

Christians too must one day stand before the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Pet. 4:17). The idea of Christians being judged by

Above: Early Christian sarcophagus lid depicting the last judgment, Rome.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO DAVID ROGERS/METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/NEW YORK (3/7/33)

Right: The throne base of the Israelite judges at ancient Dan in Northern Israel. Since judges sat on platforms (bema) to hold court, this word came to mean a judgment seat.

Christ alarms many Christians. Is the judgment not just for people who rejected the offer of salvation through Christ? Is the judgment not held in order to condemn people to hell? Does the Bible not say that there is no judgment for Christians? Well, yes and no. The Bible is clear that those who die without Christ are lost and under God’s judgment. The Bible also says that there is no condemnation for those who believe in Christ (Rom. 8:1; John 5:24). Yet the Bible does clearly say that Christians will stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10).

Paul reminded Christians in Corinth and Rome that they were not excused from being examined before Christ’s judgment seat (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10).³ Even though he told them that they were already reconciled (2 Cor. 5:20-21) and justified (Rom. 8:1), they must still be judged by Christ.

The Bible is clear that we cannot be condemned. If we cannot be condemned, then why will we be judged? Christians must give an account to the Lord about how we handled the talents, gifts, opportunities, and responsibilities that He gave us.

There is one other type of bema, or judgment seat, that was popular in Paul’s day that we have not yet mentioned. This bema was familiar to the



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO DAVID ROGERS (4/21/5)

Corinthians and to the Romans. Both cities had well-known olympic-style games. The winner was led to the bema where the judge sat. There he would receive his reward. Paul pictured Christians as athletes in a spiritual contest. Like the winner in Corinth would stand before the judge, so one day we will stand before the bema, the judgment seat of Christ, in order to receive our imperishable reward. The judge bestowed gifts to the winners, not to punish the losers. We face the judgment seat of Christ in order to receive our rewards.

This does not mean that Christians should regard the judgment seat of Christ lightly. Scripture teaches that rewards can be received or lost. What a Christian does in this life is built on the foundation of Christ. Yet what each Christian has built will be tested. Paul used the image of testing by fire. “And the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work” (1 Cor.

3:13, NASB). If a man’s work survives the test, then he will receive his reward (3:14). “If any man’s work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire” (3:15, NASB).

When Christians face Christ’s judgment seat, they are not facing the risk of punishment, only the possibility of reward (or the loss of reward). Christ rewards the “good and faithful” servant who has handled the talents well (Matt. 25:21). The Christian who has not been faithful is not condemned (Rom. 5:1; 8:1), but that person does “suffer loss”—the loss of rewards that he or she could have had (1 Cor. 3:15). Paul told the Corinthians that they would receive recompense based on what they had done. Those who were faithful would receive good (rewards). Those who were not faithful would receive bad (no rewards) (2 Cor. 5:1-10).

Today, people scoff at the thought of a final judgment where every per-

son must give an account of himself or herself. Thus, we must be faithful in proclaiming the full truth of God’s Word: “We shall all stand before the judgment seat of God” (Rom. 14:10, NASB).

¹E. A. Judge, “Judgment Seat” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 1982), 644, notes that Paul used the image of a judgment seat in his letter to Rome, where the judgment seat of Caesar was, and in his letter to Corinth, where Paul had once stood before the judgment seat of Gallio.

²William Vine makes too big a distinction when he tries to make three different judgment seats of Christ. Vine suggests that there is a tribunal of Christ held when Christ returns. Then there is an earthly Throne of Christ held during the thousand-year reign of Christ (Matt. 25:31). Finally, there is a Great White Throne of Judgment after the thousand-year reign of Christ (Rev. 20:11). See William Vine, “Judgment Seat,” *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Westwood: Revell, 1966), 282-83. Of course, all these events will occur, but the New Testament just groups them all together under the phrase “the judgment seat of Christ.” All these different events will occur while Christ is sitting on His judgment seat.

³In Romans 14:10 Paul speaks of the judgment seat of God. This is not different from the judgment seat of Christ. Paul frequently switched these words. For instance, in Romans 8:9 Paul spoke of “the Spirit of God” and “the Spirit of Christ.” Obviously, there are not two Holy Spirits.

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