

BEMA

The “Judgment” of the Christian

Why Jesus Matters



Patrick J. Griffiths

BEMA

Copyright © 2017 Patrick J. Griffiths
Published by Torn Veil Publications

Waukesha Bible Church
553 W24079 Glendale Road
Waukesha, Wisconsin 53189
www.waukeshabible.org

All rights reserved. No part of this booklet may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.



NEWTON'S CRADLE AND GOD'S *Story*:

"Newton's cradle, named after Sir Isaac Newton, is a device that demonstrates conservation of momentum and energy using a series of swinging spheres. When one on the end is lifted and released, it strikes the stationary spheres; a force is transmitted through the stationary spheres and pushes the last one upward. If one ball is pulled away and is left to fall, it strikes the first ball in the series and comes to nearly a dead stop. The ball on the opposite side acquires most of the velocity and almost instantly swings in an arc almost as high as the release height of the last ball. This shows that the final ball receives most of the energy and momentum that was in the first ball. The impact produces a compression wave that propagates through the intermediate balls."¹

In shadow form, this illustrates for us the centerpiece of the Gospel for the Christian life. Who Jesus is in His person and work is the red ball. Everything that follows carries the energy of that first strike. Moreover, everything will come back to that first action. We believe the Bible teaches a single *Story* and at the center of this *Story* is JESUS. Everything from start to finish and everything in between is from the gospel, sustained by the gospel, and is the gospel. FOR JESUS IS THE GOSPEL!

Perhaps another way of understanding this idea is to imagine the biblical narrative as an enormous library. The Gospel, JESUS, houses every one of the books within the library. Often, individuals will pull books from the library to read and study topics and themes without remembering the larger

library it came from. Every book coming from this library carries within it the stamp of the library. One might cut the page bearing the imprint of the library out of the book, but it is to the detriment of the book. The Bema Seat Judgment is one “book” within the larger Scripture library telling the Gospel story of Jesus Christ.

The word **bema** is found in twelve verses (Matt. 27:19; John 19:13; Acts 7:5; 12:21; 18:12, 16, 17; 25:6, 10, 17, Rom. 14:10, 2 Cor. 5:10). It is used of Pilate at the judgment of Christ (Matt. 27:19; John 19:13). It is used as a “stool” (Acts 7:5), a “throne” (Acts 12:21), and a place of sentencing (Acts 18:12, 16, 17; 25:6, 10, 17).

There is an element of discernment, evaluation, estimation, and assessment contained in the way the word is used in the New Testament. There are two primary passages as it relates to the believer (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10).

“But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (Rom. 14:10).

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things *done* in *his* body, according to that he hath done, whether *it be* good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10).

Let us consider for a moment how the idea of Bema occurs in its historical context.

In the large Olympic arenas, there was an elevated seat on which the judge of the contest sat. After the contests were over, the successful competitors would assemble before the *bema* to receive their rewards or crowns. The *bema* was not a judicial

bench where someone was condemned; it was a reward seat.²

It is not the Lord's purpose here to chasten His child for his sins, but to reward his service for those things done in the name of the Lord.³

In the exercise of the reward of the believer, it will be Christ and not the believer that is glorified by the reward.⁴

There will be an accounting before God of every New Testament believer's life. The evaluation of one's life exists. However, in saying this let us make sure we have our presuppositions in place.

Our intent in studying the BEMA Judgment is to show the centrality of the gospel in all the various pieces and stories making up the biblical *Story*. Unfortunately, it is possible to look at various themes and topics that are Bible-based and not see how the gospel produces and sustains the parts. Because of this neglect, some often erroneously interpret behaviors and good works that are consequences of the gospel as what determines our relationship to God. This is unfortunate. If we do not see the fruit as fruit, it becomes the root. Instead of freedom and life, there is bondage and death. Thus, the intent of this study is to celebrate the gospel and the fruit it produces in the life of God's people.

BASIC IDEAS:

There are four basic ideas this study will attempt to show true.

1. At the BEMA, God will reveal all that He chose to do in us and through us to those around us.

2. At the BEMA, no unbeliever will be present.
3. At the BEMA, every believer will have fruit to show.
4. Thus, the BEMA is a time of joy and celebration, not shame and judgment.

THE BIG PICTURE - THE *Story*:

If our understanding of God's *Story* is correct, then the energy from the "first strike" has carried us to this point and beyond [i.e. Newton's Cradle]. The Bible teaches a final and full accounting. There is a tendency to look at this from a gospel-less perspective. If such is the case, then there is shame and condemnation. But if, however, we keep this in proper alignment with the gospel, there is joy and celebration, for the BEMA is not about us, but about the faithfulness of God bringing about His victory to finish what He began (1 Thess. 5:23, 24).

God's *Story* has six acts: God, Creation, Rejection, Redemption, Re-Creation and Worship. The *Story* ends with a final judgment where God acknowledges the last period on the last sentence. This short study speaks to the final judgment of separation between the woman's seed (i.e. Jesus as the fulfillment of Gen. 3:15) and that of the serpent.

INITIAL TRUTHS TO REMEMBER:

I always find it unfortunate that for most Christians the BEMA Judgment is one of fear and/or motivation. Fear of punishment for past sins or motivation to earn rewards for good works. We can clarify this unfortunate idea by noting that all people have one of two identities. Everyone is either IN CHRIST or IN ADAM. If IN CHRIST (i.e. believers), the BEMA is a time of unprecedented joy and celebration. If IN ADAM (i.e. unbelievers), their judgment is a time of

unprecedented anguish and horror. For the Christian, this judgment is the BEMA. For the unbelieving, this judgment is the GREAT WHITE THRONE (Rev. 20:11). Whether one believes these two judgments are on the same day or separated by a thousand years does not matter as to the nature of the judgment. But we do great harm to the gospel when we put the characteristics of the GREAT WHITE THRONE onto the BEMA.

The judgment seat of Christ in no way will be dealing with our sin. This judgment by God happened at the cross (2 Cor. 5:20, 21). There is no sin assigned in any way to our account (Heb. 9:23-10:2). Apart from the righteousness of Christ, our account against God will be empty (2 Cor. 5:20, 21).

Many say the judgment seat of Christ will deal with our service. However, even here when judgment happens for the works done from a fleshly motive, the fire will consume them and treat them as non-rewarded.

We should look at the judgment seat of Christ as an occasion of unprecedented joy and celebration. Here the removal of the old nature is final. It is here where one's practice will finally match up with one's position. In that glorious day, "when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2).

FACE TO FACE:

Many Christians are already familiar with the thought of the BEMA judgment. The impression left by much teaching on this subject is reflected in the following questions.

1. Is the BEMA a time of remorse, regret, penal judgment, and personal shortcoming?

2. Is the BEMA about us or is there something or someone else who will be receiving the spotlight?
3. Is it a time of reflecting back on failed opportunity and missed choices?
4. Is it possible for the believer not to be ruling and reigning with Christ in heaven?
5. Are we ever capable of really determining whether our actions (let alone our motives) have been pure?
6. If fruit bearing is the basis for evaluation, what exactly is fruit bearing?
7. Is it possible for the work of God to fail to such a degree that there is no rewardable act in His workmanship?
8. If our placement in heaven is based on our performance on earth, when is enough, enough?
9. If salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, why does sanctification and glorification demand a different standard?
10. How does a theology of future rewards from a man-centered perspective generate the kind of rest mentioned in Matthew 11:28-30? Is initial salvation the believer's only certainty concerning placement?
11. What exactly does the label "overcomer" mean?
12. Is there a legitimate distinction between entering the kingdom and inheriting the kingdom?
13. If all we need is in Christ, what more would we want?

There are many responses to the above questions and most are frightening. Friend, there is a better way. This lesson will address and answer those questions.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY:

Everything we know about the gospel comes to bear on this one glorious and unprecedented moment when the work of Jesus is fully manifested and all creation bows before Him as King of kings and Lord of lords (Phil. 2:10-11). In order to

understand the BEMA as one of celebration and not anguish, let us consider several areas.

FIRST, if fruit bearing is the basis for evaluation, what exactly is fruit bearing?

In looking at the idea of fruit bearing, it is important to remember that fruit-bearing, good works, obedience, and the New Testament commands are all synonymous ideas. There is no distinction between any of these “actions.”

Passages like Matthew 3:8 and Luke 3:8 strongly suggest that all good trees/soil produce good fruit. Would not such fruit bearing be certain? What if there is no fruit? Is not the consequence of non-fruit bearing to be cut off and thrown into the fire (Matt. 3:10; John 15:6; Luke 3:9; 13:9)? How does this align with God finishing what He begins (Rom. 8:29, 30; Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:23, 24)?

If the underlying thought concerning fruit bearing is that a good tree can only produce good fruit, then why are we thinking about our bad fruit (Matt. 7:18; Luke 6:43; Mark 4:8)? A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, so whatever bad fruit present is of no real consequence.

Ephesians 2:10 speaks of the believer being God’s workmanship. The term “workmanship” says **we are the product of His hands**. He is molding the believer. He is designing us. He is doing the work in us and through us. This does not negate our will to choose, but it does source our will in His (Phil. 2:12, 13).

The word used in 2 Corinthians 5:10 for “pleasing” is the same word translated as “acceptable” in Romans 14:18.

- “For he who in this way serves Christ is **acceptable** to God and

approved by men" (Rom. 14:18).

What is of interest is to see how both Romans 14 AND 2 Corinthians 5 speak in the context of the BEMA. We seek to please Him because we are already ACCEPTED BY HIM. Nothing we do can merit what God gives by grace through faith.

The recompense or reward one receives for salvation is described in 2 Corinthians 5:1-5. The reward is the "clothing" prepared by God for His people and the place where they dwell with Him forever. It is unfortunate that we superimpose our horizontal experience unto this theological truth. Because of this, we "feel" the need to compare, to be "fruit" checkers. In the parable of the workers in the field (Matt. 20:1-6), all of the workers are paid the same. One of the tensions among the disciples of Jesus was, "Who will be the greatest" (Luke 22:24, 26). When one thinks of the thief on the cross, one might wonder what type of reward he would secure by his "fruit."

If a work is not a fruit of the Spirit, then it is a work of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-24). If it is a work of the flesh, it has no eternal value and will be consumed in the day of accounting.

SECOND, is it possible for the work of God to fail to such a degree that there is no rewardable act in His workmanship?

Because of the certainty of fruit bearing, the work of God cannot fail. There is nothing like a so-called "fruitless" believer. The implication of this is every believer will be rewardable. This is the point of Romans 14:3, 4.

³"The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to

judge the one who eats, **for God has accepted him.** ⁴Who are you to judge the servant of another? **To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand**" (Rom. 14:3, 4).

Consider the following thoughts on Romans 14.

- Accept one another BECAUSE God accepts you!
- The BEMA will bring all of this to light.
- The BEMA will not bring to light who was or was not right regarding the eating or not eating of meat offered to idols.
- The BEMA will show that God accepted both those who ate meat and those who do not eat meat equally.
- Those who do eat should not dismiss or trample under foot those who do not eat.
- Those who do not eat should not condemn those who do eat.

This is the point of 1 Corinthians 4:4, 5

⁴"For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.
⁵Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; **and then each man's praise will come to him from God**" (1 Cor. 4:4, 5).

Second Corinthians 5:10 speaks of the "deeds done in our bodies." The "deeds in the body" are not simply matters of morality, but gospel sourced and birthed. The deeds produced by Paul are those "suffered" because of the gospel. Those who preach themselves have no such "deeds." Without the JESUS SEED, there can be no gospel fruit. Those whose "works/deeds" pass the test are those who have the JESUS

SEED. Do not get caught in the idea that God is micro managing your deeds.

The life of Christ flows from Christians, just as the life of Adam flows from non-Christians. The identity or characteristics of that life are rooted in the source. I always struggle with the idea that a Christian would not seek to please God or who are not instruments of righteousness. Friend, if such were the case, I would tell you they are not Christian. **This is not me being judgmental of their behavior, but of their birth.** Good trees produce good fruit and an evil tree produces evil fruit. I do not get upset at an apple tree that gives me apples. It is what I expect because it is an apple tree. I would find it unsettling and strange if I had an apple tree that gave me venomous snakes.

If we affirm faith in the person and work of Jesus, we will live a life pleasing to Him. If we do not seek Him above all else, then we have a problem with birth not behavior, because the birth causes the behavior. It cannot be any other way. In addition, do not be introspective as whether you do or do not prize Him above all else. If you are born again, you do.

When Jesus spoke of the various soil types in Mark 4, some soil produced 40, some 60, and some a hundredfold, but the fruit was all the same. The size of the harvest differed, but not the fruit. Christians are living Christ-like righteousness, Holy Spirit generated holiness, Calvary canceling sin, and God pleasing lives. The arena for this manifestation of fruit is different from person to person, but it is all the same stuff because the JESUS SEED always produces GOSPEL FRUIT.

Thus, your arena might be in the trades, yours might be on some foreign soil, yours might be parenting small children, yours might be battling some chronic, life-sucking illness, or

yours might be in vocational Christian ministry, but it is all GOSPEL FRUIT and all of it bears the marks of JESUS.

Those who are IN CHRIST are already accepted and will not fail to stand in the Day of Judgment. Remember Romans 14:1-12? God is faithful to finish what He began. He will give us what He promised in verses 1-5.

Matthew 24 and 25 is often used to justify the belief that there are some believers who are rewarded and some who are not. However when studied in context, the scenario of Matthew 25 is clear enough. There are only two kinds of people, saved and lost. There is not a third category of saved lost people or dark light.

Many believers are under the impression hearing “well done” is an affirmation for earthly faithfulness to obedience. Its reception is tentative and uncertain. It is heard only by those who have “totally surrendered” to Christ. Because only the obedient receive it, some might not hear it. Yet, is this how we are to view the idea of hearing, “Well done?”

This block of teaching in Matthew 24-25 is in response to a question asked by his disciples. Jesus made a statement in 24:2 concerning the future destruction of the Temple. The question then asked was, “What will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?” (v. 3). In response to the question, He runs through a series of events preceding the end. He then says, “Then the end will come” (v.14). He speaks of the Tribulation of those days and the coming of the Son of Man (vv. 15-31). He also speaks of the days of Noah being like the days in which the Son of Man returns (vv. 36ff).

He then paints a picture of contrasts between those who are ready and those who are not ready. If Matthew 25 can apply,

then every believer will hear, "Well done my good and faithful servant." If this is not true, then the alternative is tragically confusing (Matt. 25:30). Because of our understanding of fruit bearing (Mark 4; Gal. 5), every believer will have "works" that are "gold, silver and precious stone." Joy and reward awaits all who appear in that day.

It appears His point would be, "Be ready so that when I come you do not find yourself unsaved." If this is correct, then every saved person falls into the first category and every unsaved person falls into the second category. Because of the parallelism, every saved person rules over all His possessions, are ready, will hear, "Well done," is good and faithful, will sit at God's right hand, and will inherit the kingdom. This is consistent with 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24, and Philippians 1:6 and John's usage of the idea of every believer being an overcomer. Not to hear well done is to find oneself in a place of eternal fire and punishment. Ultimately, one either hears, "Well done," or is "well done."

Every saved person will have service that is rewardable (1 Cor. 4:5). To be sure, this is but an initial attempt at answering an area that is large and complex. The answer is consistent with the doctrines of grace, one's position in Christ, and the certainty of God's rule over man's will. It is not an exhaustive look, but it does provide "food for thought."

THIRD, if performance determines placement, when is enough, enough?

(This will tie in with point four) Is it ever possible for the believer to know when enough fruit / good works is enough? If salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, why would sanctification and glorification demand a different standard?

Although Evangelicals identify justification as being a monergistic work (the work of God alone), why have so many made sanctification and our ultimate placement in glorification a synergistic work (a cooperation between God and us)? If we could not contribute then, why do we think we can now? John 15:4 and 5 clearly speak of not being able to do anything apart from Him. The cross swallows completely the “I” of self. This appears to be the point of Romans 6:1ff, Galatians 2:20 and Colossians 3:1-4.

FOURTH, what does “overcomer” mean? Is there a legitimate distinction between entering the kingdom and inheriting the kingdom?

By far, the apostle John dominates the New Testament usage of the word **nikao** (overcomer). His usage and our understanding of it are crucial.

- First, Jesus speaks of having overcome the world (John 16:33).

For us, our union with Him makes what He is ours (1 John 4:17).

- Second, John speaks of the believer having already overcome the wicked one (1 John 2:13, 14).
- Third, as a child of God we have overcome the spirit of the antichrist.

Again, this is true because of our identity being in Christ (1 John 4:4). This has nothing to do with performance or obedience.

- Fourth, it is our faith in Christ that identifies us as ones who overcome the world (1 John 5:4, 5).

- Fifth, the implication of not being ones who overcome is more than a failure to reign (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).

The ones who overcome inherit all things (Rev. 21:7). Since we are sons and daughters, we are heirs (Gal. 4:7). In fact, we are joint heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). Such talk to the contrary is unscriptural.

CONCLUSION:

There are several observations.

- **First**, the coming of Christ is a day of great celebration and joy.
- **Second**, we should see the **BEMA** Judgment as a time for removing forever the old nature.

Our old nature was judicially pronounced dead when we received Christ as our Savior. At the BEMA, our old nature will be experientially removed completely and forever.

- **Third**, every believer will receive in that day a reward for service (1 Cor. 4:5).
- **Fourth**, because it is a day for the removal of the old nature, we cannot help but believe it will be a day of incredible rejoicing.

Friend in that day we will lose forever our old nature. **The idea that we will be ashamed and downcast is a great disservice to the nature of the event and to the power of the gospel.** May God open our eyes to the sufficiency of His work

in our behalf. May we see the day of accounting as a day in which He receives His glory in the church. AMEN.

ENDNOTES:

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newton%27s_cradle

² Lehman Strauss, *God's Plan for the Future*, 111.

³ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, (Grand Rapids:Zondervan, 1977), 223.

⁴ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 226.

WUKESHA BIBLE CHURCH



CHRIST-EXALTING - WORD-CENTERED - GRACE-BASED - GLOBAL-IMPACTING

262-542-7177

www.waukeshabible.org