

The Bema: Judgment, Reward, and Rulership at the Coming of Christ — The Short Version

Paper 2 in a 12 Part Series

by Escape the Mustard Tree

A plain-language companion to Paper 2. Everything here is worked out at length there, with the Greek, the objections, and the sources.

There is a day coming

Every Christian will stand in front of Jesus one day and give an account of his life. Paul says so plainly:

"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." (2 Cor. 5:10)

Notice who is in that sentence. Paul says **we**. He puts himself in it. He is writing to a church, about people he has already called saints. So this is not a warning aimed at outsiders. It's a description of what happens to Christians.

Most people, when they hear "judgment," picture a courtroom. Someone is on trial. The question is guilt, and the sentence could go either way.

That is not this.

Two very different questions

Think of a young man born into a family. He is a son. That is settled. Nobody is going to review it at Thanksgiving dinner.

But suppose his father hands him the keys to the family business and says, "Run this while I'm gone." When the father comes home, there will be a conversation. Not about whether the boy is still his son. About what he did with the business.

Those are two different questions, and the second one doesn't put the first one back on the table.

That is the difference between what was settled at the cross and what is settled at this judgment. The word Paul uses for "judgment seat" is *bema*, and it just means a raised platform. A magistrate could sit on one, and in the New Testament usually does. But there was another kind: the platform at the games, where the official handed out the wreaths to the runners. Paul was writing to Corinth, a city that hosted those games, and he uses the language of the stadium all through that letter. Every crown he promises is the runner's wreath, never the crown a king wears by right. That is the platform he has in mind.

What is not being asked

The penalty for your sin was paid. All of it. When Jesus said "It is finished" (John 19:30), He wasn't describing a work in progress. He was saying the bill was settled.

So when you stand there, the penalty is not what is being assessed. That bill was paid once, and it doesn't get presented a second time.

But sin still matters

Here is where people get confused, so let's be careful.

The sins you committed before you believed were passed over at the cross. That is settled.

The sins that come after — the ones in the ordinary business of living — still need dealing with, and God made a way to deal with them. It is not a matter of getting saved over again. It's a matter of agreeing with God.

"But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7)

The next verses say that if we claim we have no sin, we are fooling ourselves — but if we agree with God about what we have done, He is faithful and just to cleanse us. That is the whole arrangement. Walk in the light. Agree with God about what the light shows you. Keep short accounts.

Sin dealt with that way doesn't pile up against you.

Sin left alone does something else. It eats a life. It takes the years and the energy and gives nothing back. And that is how sin shows up at this judgment — not as a bill to be paid a second time, but in what your life came to.

What is being asked

Paul gives the picture in one passage:

"For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." (1 Cor. 3:11-15)

Read that slowly, because it says two things at once about the same man.

His work can burn. All of it, potentially. That is a real loss, and Paul doesn't soften it.

He himself is saved. Not maybe. Not partly. Saved.

The foundation is Jesus, and nobody is checking the foundation. What gets tested is what was built on top of it.

Nobody skips this

There is no group that gets waved through. Paul says "we must **all** appear." The man with a life full of gold and the man with a life full of straw both stand there. The fire is the same fire. What comes out of it is not the same.

And the reward is measured out. In one of Jesus' stories a master leaves his servants the same amount of money each and comes back to see what they did with it. One earned ten times what he was handed, and was put over ten cities. Another earned five, and was put over five. A third gave back exactly what he was given, having done nothing with it, and was put over nothing. How much a man is given to do differs. Whether he is given anything at all doesn't.

What is actually at stake

This is the part most people have never been taught, and it is the heart of the matter.

Jesus said it this way:

"For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works." (Matt. 16:25-27)

"Life" and "soul" in those verses are the same word. And look where Jesus goes in the very next breath — to His coming, and to rewarding each one according to his works. Losing your soul and the day of reward are in the same sentence, out of His own mouth.

So what is at stake is your **life** — not whether you belong to God, but whether you get to really live in the age He is bringing. Peter calls it "the end of your faith — the salvation of your souls" (1 Pet. 1:9). Something still being received. Something still ahead.

That is what this judgment decides.

What the reward actually is

It is not a nicer cloud. God made man to rule. That was the assignment on the first page of the Bible, before anything went wrong, and it has never been withdrawn.

The reward is a share in the reign that is coming — a real kingdom, part of it in the heavens and part of it on the earth, with real responsibility handed to real people. Jesus told the Twelve they would sit on thrones. He promised the one who overcomes a place with Him on His own throne. The crowns the New Testament talks about are the winner's wreath from those same games, and every one of them is dated to the day Jesus appears.

It also involves a change to your body. Everyone is raised — that's not the reward. What is held out beyond that is a body covered in glory, which is what makes it possible to stand with Him and reign with Him at all. Scripture calls that glory a **hope**, something waited for and worked toward, not something already in hand.

And this is where a word gets misused. The New Testament speaks of **adoption** as something still future — Christians "eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body" (Rom. 8:23). That is not becoming God's child; you're already one, and that never changes. It is being placed as a son, given the standing and the position that a firstborn son holds in a household. It is what qualifies a person to rule. And it is handed out at this judgment.

The Bride

There's one more picture, and it's the oldest one.

God put Adam into a deep sleep, opened his side, and made the woman out of what He took (Gen. 2:21-23). At the cross, a soldier put a spear into Jesus' side and blood and water came out (John 19:34). Paul quotes the Genesis passage and tells us straight out what it is about: "I speak concerning Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:31-32).

Blood and water. Both of them are what a bride is made of. The blood answers sin along the way. The water is the washing Paul describes a few verses earlier, where Jesus is cleansing the church so He can present her to Himself without spot or wrinkle.

Neither one applies itself. A person has to keep coming for both.

But notice who does the building. Adam built nothing. He was asleep. God made the woman out of what came from his side. It works the same way here — the Spirit and Jesus as our High Priest do the making, out of what came from His side.

When Revelation describes the wedding, it says two things about the same garment in back-to-back verses: the Lamb's wife "has made herself ready," and "to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints" (Rev. 19:7-8). Made herself ready. And granted. Both are true.

The Bride is not simply everyone in the family. She is taken out — the way the woman was taken out of the man — and this judgment is where that happens.

When

Not at death. The New Testament dates it to His appearing, every time.

The order runs like this. Jesus comes for His own, and the whole church — everyone from Pentecost to that moment — is brought together in front of Him. Those who had died are raised. Those still living are gathered with them. This judgment follows. Then the marriage. Then the ruling begins.

So this is not a distant footnote at the end of everything. It stands between here and the kingdom, and it decides who has a place in it.

What this is not

This is not your salvation being reviewed. Your standing before God was settled once, at the cross, and nothing at this judgment reopens it. You cannot lose what Christ finished. If you have been taught that your place in the family is always up for review, that is not true, and it will exhaust you.

This is not a penalty being assessed. The bill for sin was paid at the cross and is not presented a second time. What is examined is what you built on the foundation, not whether the foundation is still there. Sin left alone does show up here, but in what your life came to, not as a debt reopened.

This is not a Christian life with nothing at stake. That is the opposite mistake, and it empties out most of the New Testament. Whole chapters are written to Christians about running to win, building carefully, holding fast, and not losing what was worked for. Those passages are not filler.

Why this should change something

The truth sits between those two mistakes, and it is better than either. Your place in the family is permanent and untouchable. What you do with the life you were given is really up to you, and it's going to be looked at, by Someone who knows exactly what you had to work with.

That is not a threat. It is what makes the ordinary parts of your life matter.

"And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work." (Rev. 22:12)

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.