

THE WORD OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Judgment Seat of Christ

The judgment seat of Christ is a central item of “the word of righteousness” (Heb. 5:13), the truth in the Bible related to the Christian life under the government of God. It is at the judgment seat that every believer will ultimately settle his accountability to God; it is the verdict of the judgment seat that will determine the just recompense for each believer; and it is in the light of the judgment seat that we, the believers, must conduct our daily life and Christian work in all soberness and diligence.

In the previous issue of *Affirmation and Critique* we demonstrated that a wage, repayment, and recompense will be given to each believer at the Lord’s coming, according to his life and work in this age. The determination of these wages necessitates a judgment, and a judgment requires a judge. In numerous passages the New Testament reveals the Lord Jesus as the Judge. He Himself is the Judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; 17:31; 2 Tim. 4:1). Since as God He is the “Judge of all” (Heb. 12:23), He is also the Judge of His own people. In the Gospels, the Lord taught concerning the righteousness of the believers, speaking in parables of their being delivered to Himself as a Judge for full repayment (Matt. 5:25-26; Luke 12:58-59). In 2 Timothy 4:8 Paul said that a crown of righteousness was laid up for him, with which “the Lord, the righteous Judge” will recompense him. In Hebrews 10:30 Paul declared, “The Lord will judge His people,” and James warns the believers that “the Judge stands before the doors” (5:9).

The awarding of wages to the believers also necessitates a time and place for judgment or reckoning in which each one’s recompense will be determined. The New Testament both alludes to and speaks clearly of this time and place in several portions. Peter says that the Lord’s judgment begins “from the house of God” and continues until the coming of the day of the Lord (1 Pet. 4:17; 2 Pet. 3:10), which will be a day of judgment of the Jews, the believers, and the Gentiles before the millennial kingdom.

The day of judgment will be “after a long time” when the Master returns to settle accounts with His slaves (Matt. 25:19; 18:23). *After a long time* signifies the entire church age, at the end of which the Lord will return to hold an accounting with the believers. Concerning this time, John assures his readers that if the love of God is perfected in us, we shall have boldness, not fear, “in the day of the judgment” (1 John 4:17).

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To be sure, some of the Lord’s judgments are carried out in this age for the disciplinary dealing and perfection of His believers at the present time. However, the final, comprehensive judgment of the believers will be carried out at a specific time and place which the New Testament calls the judgment seat of Christ, or the judgment seat of God. This is clearly mentioned in Romans 14:10-12, which says, “For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God, for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall openly confess to God.’ So then each one of us will give an account concerning

himself to God.” The context of this chapter makes it very clear that the “we,” the “each one of us,” who will appear before this tribunal are the believers, among whom Paul included himself.

Three Kinds of Judgment

Perhaps few believers realize that the New Testament speaks of three distinct times and places of reckoning. One reason for this confusion is that some of the scriptural language used to describe the different judgments appears to be the same. Another reason, of course, is that nearly all the important matters related to eschatology and end-time prophecies are subject to diverse interpretations. In this brief presentation, our burden is not to enter into the fray of doctrinal debates on these various issues. Rather, we shall briefly identify the key verses and truths related to these three judgments and allow the reader to consider them honestly, prayerfully, and soberly.

The Judgment of the Dead Unbelievers

The best-understood judgment of God is the final assize for the dead unbelievers. This is spoken of most graphically in Revelation 20:11-12, 15. These verses speak of a “great white throne and Him who sat upon it” (v. 11). As in all the judgments of God, the One who sits in judgment is the Lord Jesus, for God the Father has given all judgment to the Son (John 5:22) and has ordained Him to be the Judge of the living and the dead. Those who appear before the great white throne are “the dead, the great and the small” (Rev. 20:12). That the dead stand before the throne indicates that they have been resurrected for this purpose. This is the resurrection of the unbelievers, the “resurrection of judgment” spoken of in John 5:28-29. This resurrection takes place after the millennium because John prophetically saw that the unbelieving dead “did not live again until the thousand years were completed” (Rev. 20:5).

Because these perishing unbelievers are not found in the book of life, they will be judged according to the “scrolls,” which are a record of their works and deeds (vv. 15, 12). Being condemned by the Lord because of their evil deeds and perishing because of their unbelief, they are cast into the lake of fire. At this judgment, there is no mention of saving faith, redemptive grace, reconciliation, or atonement, nor is there any positive outcome. Rather, a careful reading of these verses reveals that all who appear at this judgment suffer eternal perdition. The believers in Christ have no part in this judgment because their ultimate disposition has been secured through faith in Christ.

The Judgment of the Living Unbelievers

Since the Lord Jesus is the Judge of the living and the dead, there also must be a time and a place for the judgment of those unbelievers who are living, specifically those who are alive at the time of the Lord’s second coming. We find this judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. Verse 31 says, “But when the Son of Man comes in His glory and all the angels with Him, at that time He will sit on the throne of His glory.” *Son of Man* is the title of Christ in relation to the Messianic kingdom, which commences at the consummation of the present age (13:40-41). Christ will sit on the throne of His glory, which is the throne of David, at the time of the “restoration” when He comes in His glory at the end of this age (Luke 1:32-33; Matt. 19:28). At this time Christ will “judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31).

Whereas the great white throne judgment occurs at the end of the millennium, the sequence of events associated with “the throne of His glory” places it at the end of this age, just before the millennium. At that time, there will be a great number of unbelievers, the “nations” (Matt. 25:32), who will have passed through the tribulation of the end times and remain alive. During the persecution under Antichrist in the final three and a half years of this age, some among the nations will treat the suffering believers well. At His coming back, Christ will judge these living unbelievers, not according to the law of Moses or the gospel of grace, but righteously according to the way they treated the least of His brothers.

Among those who appear at this judgment, some will be counted as “sheep.” These will be blessed and reckoned as righteous to inherit the kingdom (Matt. 25:33-34) which was prepared for them *from* the foundation of the

world (not *before* the foundation of the world, as for the elect believers in Ephesians 1:4). They will be transferred into the millennium to enjoy the blessing of the restored creation as the people living under the kingly ruling of Christ and the overcoming believers and under the priestly ministry of the saved Jews (Rev. 2:26-27; Zech. 8:20-23). Those, however, who do not pass this judgment, will be counted as “goats” and will be cast into the lake of fire (Matt. 25:41). In this way, Christ will be the Judge of the living at the throne of His glory before the millennium and the Judge of the dead at the white throne after the millennium.

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The Judgment of the Believers

Having seen how Christ will be the Judge of the living and dead unbelievers, we may now see how He will deal with His believers. For this, there are two crucial passages, Romans 14:10-12, which is quoted above, and 2 Corinthians 5:10. The latter says, “For we must all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done through the body according to what he has practiced, whether good or bad.”

Judgment seat in both of these passages is βῆμα (*bema*) in the Greek text, denoting a raised place or platform used for orations in assemblies at Athens. The word became used for a tribune in the law courts of Greece and eventually for the tribunal of a Roman magistrate or ruler, such as that of Pilate (Matt. 27:19; John 19:13), Herod (Acts 12:21), Gallio (18:12, 16, 17), and Festus (25:6, 10,

17). Twice in the New Testament (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10), this word is used for “the Divine tribunal before which all believers are hereafter to stand” (Vine 282). This place of judgment is uniquely for believers, for “none can reach the Judgment Seat except the saved” (Panton 30). As believers, we are qualified to appear at this judgment, rather than the judgment of the great white throne.

The judgment seat of Christ is different from the eternal judgment of God which is carried out mainly at the great white throne in Revelation 20. As we have seen, the eternal judgment at the great white throne will be after the millennium to judge all the dead unbelievers for eternal perdition in the lake of fire. The judgment at the judgment seat of Christ, however, will be before the millennium, immediately after Christ’s coming back. Panton helps us to identify the sequence of these events, teaching that the judgment seat of Christ is “the *first* of our Lord’s three judgments....The wicked dead are not judged until the Great White Throne (Rev. xx.5, 12), a thousand years after the judgment of the redeemed” (16, 30). Vine summarizes the entire sequence of the three judgments:

This judgment-seat is to be distinguished from the pre-millennial, earthly Throne of Christ, Matt. 25:31, and the post-millennial “Great White Throne,” Rev. 20:11, at which only “the dead” will appear. The judgment-seat of Christ will be a tribunal held “in His Parousia,” i.e., His presence with His saints after His return to receive them to Himself. (283)

The Purpose and Issue of the Judgment Seat of Christ

Second Corinthians 5:10 says that “we must all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ.” Some translations, such as the King James and the New American Standard versions, translate this phrase to say that we must all *appear* before the judgment seat of Christ. However, most authorities affirm that this weakens the force of the Greek text. The Greek word φανερωθῆναι is a strong term, better translated as *be manifested*. As Vincent says, “*Appear* is not strong enough, since it implies only *presence* at the judgment-seat. The important fact is our *being revealed* as we are” (319). To be manifested is to be revealed in the light of God, to “appear in our true light” as never before (Alford 661). This will be the time when the Lord “will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and make manifest the counsels of the hearts” (1 Cor. 4:5).

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Being inescapably manifested before Christ’s tribunal, each of the believers will “receive the things done through the body according to what he has practiced, whether good or bad.” *Receive* here is “the technical word for *receiving wages*” (Alford 661). As to the issue of the judgment seat, Vine and Scofield both allude to 1 Corinthians 3:11-15. Vine concludes, “At this *bema* believers are to be made manifest....There they will receive rewards for their faithfulness to the Lord. For all that has been contrary in their lives to His will they will suffer loss” (282-283). Scofield concurs,

The judgment of the believer’s works, not sins, is in question here. These have been atoned for, and are “remembered no more forever” (Heb. 10:17); but every *work* must come into judgment....The result is “reward” or “loss” (of the reward), “but he himself shall be saved.” (1233)

Thus, the purpose of the judgment seat of Christ is to judge all the resurrected and raptured believers for their reward or punishment in the millennial kingdom.

There is a time, a place, and a way of reckoning that is uniquely for all the believers of Christ at the end of the age of grace. We will all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ in order to equitably receive a just recompense, the wages that are commensurate with our living and works as they will be revealed at that time. May this stir us to faithfulness to the Lord to pursue Him as our portion and serve Him in His economy for the full enjoyment of grace in this age and of the reward in the next age.

by John Campbell

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