

The Forgotten Judgment Seat of Christ

Dismissed. Neglected. Forgotten. These words can describe how many treat the doctrine of the Judgment Seat of Christ (JSOC) in the New Testament. The JSOC (*bēma* in Greek) is a judgment for Christians only, where each believer's life is evaluated, and rewards are bestowed or withheld according to one's works, faithfulness, and motives (see *GraceNotes* no. 68, "Comparing the Two Coming Judgments"). It is generally agreed that it occurs after the rapture event and before the millennial kingdom.

Theologically Dismissed

Some theological systems allow only one general judgment at the end of time, which will determine whether a person is saved or not. Proponents of amillennialism and postmillennialism deny a literal thousand-year kingdom. This conflates the New Testament's references about the JSOC at the end of the church age with references to the Great White Throne judgment at the end of the millennial kingdom. Since both judgments consider one's works, this interpretation makes works the crucial criterion that proves genuine saving faith. Revelation 20:11-15 twice says that at the great white throne, the dead are judged according to their works, which determines if they are in the Book of Life, and if not, they are thrown into the lake of fire. In this view, salvation is the reward for one's faith in Christ, which good works must prove. But salvation is by grace (a free gift) and is never called a reward in the New Testament. Those who interpret the Scriptures literally, grammatically, historically, and naturally in context will arrive at a premillennial theology that separates the return of Christ for His church (the rapture) from the Second Coming of Christ to the whole earth. The assessment for rewards, not salvation, is done after the rapture at the JSOC, which is before the thousand-year kingdom.

Homiletically Neglected

It is not uncommon to find churches and church leaders who believe in the doctrine of the JSOC but have not adequately taught it. There are also some churches and church leaders who may not hold a clear understanding of the JSOC, which would hinder them from addressing the issue. Teaching about the *bēma* judgment appears to be neglected in many sermon series, Bible class lessons, small group studies, and Christian life literature. A survey of pretribulation premillennial believers today will likely find that they have not heard much about this teaching. Yet, it is a persistent theme that permeates the teachings of Jesus and the apostles from Matthew (5:12) to Revelation (22:12), either explicitly or implied by the mention of rewards. It is frequently mentioned because it is a major motivation for godly conduct. One would think that this emphasis in the New Testament should also be an emphasis in the church's teaching and preaching today. What was important to Jesus and the apostles should be important to us as we make and teach disciples of Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:19-20; 2 Tim. 2:2).

Functionally Forgotten

Sadly, many believers in Christ live as if there will be no future accounting for their lifestyles, conduct, words, and motives. Perhaps they are content knowing they will be in heaven

Number 104

and in the kingdom after this life. No believer should ignore these clear truths about the JSOC in the New Testament:

- Every church age believer will appear at the JSOC (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10)
- Every believer will give an account to the Lord for their behavior, words, and motives (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10, where the word “bad,” *phaulos*, does not refer to moral evil, but has the meaning of *inferior quality, morally substandard, worthless, of no account*, though certainly that would encompass evil behavior).
- Everything about one’s life will be made evident to that person and the Lord (1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Cor. 5:10, where the word “appear,” from the Greek *phaneraō*, means *reveal, expose*).
- God’s piercing discernment will evaluate the quality of one’s life as a Christian (1 Cor. 3:13; 4:5).
- Those whose works and faith were worthy of the Lord will receive rewards accordingly (1 Cor. 3:14; Col. 3:23-24).
- Those whose works and faith were unworthy of the Lord will be denied rewards accordingly (1 Cor. 3:15; 9:27; Col. 3:25).

To be clear, all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior will not be eternally condemned for their sins and will be in heaven and the kingdom. There is no indication that this will be anything but a joyful experience. However, it is just as clear that some will have profound sorrow, regret, and even shame when Jesus appears to initiate His *bēma* judgment (1 John 2:28; James 2:12-13 speaks of a merciless judgment; some see negative consequences of the *bēma* in some parables: Matt. 18:34-35; 22:13; 24:50-51; 25:30). There is no evidence that those negative emotions will persist beyond the JSOC into the kingdom though the loss of rewards, privileges, and a rich capacity to experience God would certainly impact one’s eternal experience. While the loss of rewards is permanent, the suffering from that loss is temporary (Rev. 21:4). We could compare this to graduates from a school. Some will be happy to graduate, while others will graduate with honors based on their performance and that honor will follow them through life. Others will simply graduate with regret that they did not work harder to achieve honors.

Conclusion

Since it is clearly taught in Scripture that all believers in Christ will appear at the *bēma* to face an evaluation of how they lived their life in Christ, every believer should give conscious attention to this truth every moment of every day. Our short lives can lay up treasures for all eternity or suffer the loss of treasures for all eternity. There is a special reward for believers who look forward with a love for Christ’s appearing, instead of shrinking from it (1 Tim. 4:8). Those who appreciate the love and free grace of God that saves them will live to honor Him and receive His gracious honor as an eternal reward at the judgment seat of Christ. This truth must never be dismissed, neglected, or forgotten.

