

# Judgment for Believers

By Dave DeWitt

## Here Is What We Know

**First, everyone will face judgment after this life.**

- **Ecclesiastes 12:14**, *For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.*
- **John 5:28-29**, *Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.*
- **Hebrews 9:27**, *... it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.*

**Second, unbelievers will be judged for their sinful deeds and thrown into the outer darkness/lake of fire.** Since they are judged for their deeds, there are probably different degrees of suffering in the lake of fire.

- **Matthew 25:30**, *Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*
- **Revelation 20:11, 13-15**, *Then I saw a great white throne...And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

**Third, believers will also be judged after death.** Their good deeds are rewarded, their bad deeds are not punished, but they hinder their ability to have good deeds.

- **Romans 14:10**, *For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.*
- **2 Corinthians 5:10**, *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.*

First notice, judgment is for *each one*. There is no group judgment. These two passages use the Greek word *bēma* for *judgment seat* instead of the more common word *krinō* for *judgment*. The *bēma* was a raised platform used as a place for judgment in many Greek and Roman cities. Many Christians say this was a word for rewards instead of punishment, but that is not always true. For example, *bēma* was used for the judgment seat where Pilate judged Jesus (Matthew 27:19; John 19:13) and from where Herod was speaking when he died (Acts 12:21).

**Fourth, Jesus Christ's death on the cross paid for the sins of the whole world.**

- **Romans 5:18**, *So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.*
- **1 John 2:2**, *and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.*
- **Hebrews 10:10**, *By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*
- **2 Peter 2:1**, *...there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them.*

**Fifth, the payment Jesus made for the sin of the world is only applied to those who receive it.**

- **John 1:12**, *But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,*

- **John 3:36**, *He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.*
- **John 5:24**, *Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.*
- **Hebrews 11:6**, *...he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.*

**Sixth, judgment for believers is about rewards, not punishment.** Believers in Jesus Christ will not be condemned (to the outer darkness or the lake of fire) for their sin because they have received Christ as their Savior, thus applying His payment to their sins. As Lewis Chafer put it, “It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the judgment [for believers], is unrelated to the problem of sin, that it is more for the bestowing of rewards than the rejection of failure.” [Chafer, L. S., *Systematic Theology*, Vol. IV: Ecclesiology-Eschatology, Dallas Seminary Press, 1948, p. 406]

- **John 14:2-3**, *I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.*
- **Romans 5:9**, *Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.*
- **Romans 8:1**, *Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

**Seventh, believers should strive for heavenly rewards.** We should serve Jesus because we love Him. But if we love Him, we will keep His commandments (John 14:15).

- **2 Timothy 4:8**, *in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.*
- **James 1:12**, *Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.*
- **2 John 8**, *Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward.*
- **Revelation 19:8**, *It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.*

There is a thought among some evangelicals, including some songs, that believers get physical crowns as rewards and cast them back at Christ’s feet, as the 24 elders did in Revelation 4:10. But the word “crowns” seems to be not something you put on your head but symbolic of believer rewards, like the gold, silver, and precious stones of 1 Corinthians 3:12. There is no example of believers casting material/physical crowns at Christ’s feet. Crowns for believers seem to represent future service in the kingdom of heaven and the millennial kingdom (Matthew 25:21).

### **Here Is What We Know about the Sequence of Events After a Believer Dies**

Putting together the information we have in the Bible, this seems to be the sequence:

- Death occurs when the soul/spirit leaves the body (Genesis 35:18). For the believer, during this church/grace age, that means then being in the presence of the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8).
- At that time, the believers are in a temporary bodily form (there is no such thing as a ghost, a disembodied human spirit – 1 Samuel 28:12-13; Matthew 17:3; Luke 16:19-31).
- At a point in the future, there is a resurrection of all the believers of this church/grace age, where first the believers who have died, then those who are still alive, receive their resurrected eternal body. That is the event often called the Rapture of the church (John 14:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:52; Hebrews 9:28).
- Since the church-age believers are rewarded before the Second Coming of Christ (the *bride* of Revelation 19:7-8), the judgment seat of Christ for believers occurs before the Second Coming.

- Believers remain in the presence of God through the end of the church age and the seven-year tribulation on earth until the Second Coming of Christ. At the Second Coming, rewarded believers return with Christ and reign with Him on earth for 1000 years (Revelation 2:26-27; 3:21; 19:8-9, 14). It should also be noted that there is a rewards' judgment for believers of all ages, not just for the church-age believers. Old Testament believers (Revelation 11:15-18) and believers of the tribulation, also have a rewards' judgment (Revelation 20:4).

### **Here Is What We Know about the Judgment Seat of Christ**

The rewards for believers are for works which build upon the foundation laid by Jesus Christ:

- **1 Corinthians 3:11-15**, *For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.*
- **1 Corinthians 4:5**, *Therefore 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.*
- **James 1:12**, *Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.*

The *gold, silver, precious stones* in Paul's illustration are what we build upon the foundation that Jesus established. There are two directives to understand here: (1) keeping God's commandments and (2) knowing God. First, it should be noted that we are called to obey commands of God, not emulate the work of God. This from Walter Henrichsen:

Remember, however, God requires of you what He does not practice. He tells you not to take vengeance; He will execute vengeance. ... You do not obtain holiness by emulating the ways of God, but by obeying His commandments. ["Seeking to Understand the Christian Life" (The Leadership Foundation, 2005, p. 106)]

- Jesus said, *"If you love Me you will keep My commandments"* (John 14:15).
- Moses said, *"You should diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and His testimonies and His statutes which He has commanded you"* (Deuteronomy 6:7).

But keeping God's commandments requires knowing the God of the commandments. The better we know God, the better we will understand His commandments. He is a God of truth, judgment, and holiness. But He is also *good and ready to forgive and abundant in lovingkindness* (Psalm 86:5). So, we cannot keep the commandments of God, if we do not know the character of God. Without the knowledge of God, keeping commandments are just religious, legalistic rituals, easily perverted by men.

- **Hosea 6:6**, *For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*
- **Romans 10:2**, *For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge.*
- **Jeremiah 9:23-24**, *Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the LORD.*

### **Tom Constable Summed It Up Well**

"To overdo the sorrow aspect of the judgment seat of Christ is to make heaven hell.

To underdo the sorrow aspect is to make faithfulness inconsequential" [Constable Commentary, p. 59].