

## INTRODUCTION

This is the 19th message in the series from 2 Corinthians called “Hope for Cracked Pots.” Today’s message is, “And the Reward goes to ...” Okay, let’s be honest. How many of you have ever watched “Dancing with the Stars” or “American Idol,” will you raise your hand? On these shows, contestants are evaluated by a panel of judges and by the American public who call in their votes. You and I are going to one day stand before Jesus Christ, and He’s going to judge us. It won’t be a panel of people like Simon, Paula, and Randy, or Lenny, Bruno, or Carrie Ann. There won’t be a chance for people to call in and vote for us. You won’t vote for me and I won’t vote for you—we’ll all be judged by the perfect judge, Judge Jesus.

In order to clear up a lot of confusion about the judgement day mentioned in 2 Corinthians, it’s important for you to know that this judgement IS NOT the judgement Jesus spoke about in Matthew 25 when He will separate the sheep from the goats—that’s the judgement of the nations. NOR is this the Great White Throne Judgment mentioned in Revelation 20 where all the lost from all the ages will be cast into the lake of fire which is the second death. This judgement is when Jesus will reward His servants for their service.

The idea of standing before Judge Jesus has brought fear and trembling to the hearts of many Christians. That’s because when most people read the word “judgment” they visualize a courtroom with a judge or jury declaring a defendant either guilty or innocent. Before we read the scripture, I want you to delete your preconceived notion of a courtroom where a judge or jury is deciding guilt or innocence. Instead of a courtroom, visualize a stage where awards are being presented. This should be an easy mental image, because Americans love to give and receive awards. In a few months, many celebrities will gather to pass out the annual Academy awards, called Oscars. The host will read the nominations for a certain category, and then in a moment of great anticipation, he or she will open an envelope and say, “And the award for best motion picture goes to...”

For you trivia fans, the first Oscars were awarded in 1929. 250 guests gathered at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel (the tickets cost \$5 each) and Douglas Fairbanks was the MC. There were no surprises, because the awards had already been announced three months earlier. The very first Oscar went to best actor, Emil Jannings. He wasn’t even present, because he had returned to his home in Germany. Today we have the Grammy Awards, the Golden Globe Awards, the People’s Choice Awards, the Espy Awards, the Heisman Trophy Award, on and on *ad nauseam*.

But my favorite annual awards are the spoof called the Darwin Awards. These are given each year to people who do such stupid things that they benefit the human race by eliminating themselves from the gene pool before they have a chance to reproduce. One the Darwin award went to a guy in Alabama who died from a bite because he and his friend were playing toss and catch with a live rattlesnake. Another Darwin Award went to the guy in Seattle who was trying to steal gasoline from an RV by siphoning it from the gas tank. The thief became violently ill and was found unconscious beside a pool of spilled sewage. Instead of inserting the siphon tube into the gas tank, he had placed it in the RV’s sewage storage tank. He was taken to the hospital and the owner of the RV refused to press charges because he said the guy had already been punished enough!

Award ceremonies happen almost every day. But of all the award ceremonies in all the history of the world, you and I will be present at the biggest, the best, and the most important. It is the judgement seat of Christ where we will hear our Master say, “And the reward goes to...” and then we’ll hear our name spoken by our Lord.

2 Corinthians 5:9-10. “So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

Turn back to 1 Corinthians 3, because Paul gives us some helpful details about what will happen at the judgement seat of Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:10-15. “But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.”

The word translated “judgement seat” is the Greek word *bema*. It is best translated as “stage” or “platform.” A bema was a raised platform where rulings and rewards were publicly announced.” When we toured the ruins of ancient Corinth in September, we saw the remains of the bema in Corinth. This is where minor rulings were made, but mostly where they would pass out the awards to the winners of the athletic contests. The chief official or judge sat on the bema so he could see the competition. The winner was summoned to the bema to receive his reward. Are you getting the picture yet? Jesus will be on the bema, and we’ll be summoned to receive our prize. In order to help you understand this judgment, let me answer five questions about the judgement seat of Christ.

### **Q1: WHO WILL BE THERE?**

This answer is short and simple: Only Christians will be there, and ALL Christians will be there. When Paul wrote “we must all appear” he was referring to all Christians. Most conservative theologians believe this will be an experience only for the Church—the Bride of Christ. We won’t be the only ones who spend eternity with Jesus in heaven; there will also be Old Testament Saints, and Tribulation Saints. The Old Testament Saints, like Abraham and Moses, and the Tribulation Saints, those who refuse to bear the mark of the beast during the future tribulation will go through a similar judgement after the 7 year tribulation. (See [Daniel 12:1-2](#); [Matthew 8:11](#); [Revelation 20:4-6](#)).

Of course, we won’t be the only ones there. Judge Jesus will be there. His knowledge is perfect and His evaluation is flawless. We won’t judge ourselves, because most of us have major blind spots. We won’t be judged by our friends and family because they might be tempted to be too

lenient. We won't be judged by our enemies, because they might want to kick us out. We'll be judged by Jesus who is perfect in His knowledge, love, and justice.

## **Q2: WHERE AND WHEN WILL IT HAPPEN?**

The answer is: In heaven after the rapture and before Christ returns to set up His Kingdom on earth. Jesus often spoke about being rewarded in heaven. For instance he said, “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.” (Matthew 5:12)

I believe the next thing to happen on God's prophetic calendar will be the rapture of the church. According to 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus will appear in a nanosecond in the sky, and the bodies of dead Christians will be resurrected and those of us alive will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air. Once we're in heaven, I believe the next event will be the award ceremony—the judgement seat of Christ. It's God preparing the Bride, the church, for the Marriage of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7). Ephesians 5:27 says “He will present the church to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any other blemish, but that she should be holy and blameless.” That's perfect terminology—He will present the Bride to Himself. I've officiated at hundreds of weddings where the father of the bride presents a beautiful bride to the wide-eyed groom. But God is both the Father and Groom! Every bride I've ever seen was beautiful, but I've never seen one without a single fault or blemish. The church is beautiful now, but she's not perfect yet. The church won't be an unblemished bride until she goes through this judging/awarding/purifying experience at the bema. After the bema and the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, and when the seven years of tribulation on earth are over, then Christ will return to planet earth to set up His 1,000 year kingdom. He'll be the King over all the earth, and as His bride, the Queen, the Bible says we will reign with Him.

## **Q3: WHAT WILL HAPPEN?**

There is widespread confusion among Christians about the bema. Some people think Jesus will play a video showing everything we ever did—good or bad. I think some well-meaning pastors have even preached this as a way to try to get Christians to behave. But the bema will NOT be a place where we will answer for our sins—our sins were dealt with at the cross, and Romans 8:1 says, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Some of this confusion comes from bad songs. In 1979, 19 year-old Amy Grant released a #1 Contemporary Christian song entitled, “My Father's eyes.” (Not the same song as Eric Clapton's 1998 hit.) I can remember hearing the song back then and thinking, “It's a pretty song, but it has some terrible theology.” The second verse said, “On that day when we will pay for all the deeds we have done / Good and bad they'll all be had to see by everyone / And when you're called to stand and say just what you saw in me / More than anything I know I want your words to be / She had her Father's eyes.” Ah, how sweet—but yuck, how misleading! The song was written by her future ex-husband Gary Chapman, so I can't really blame Amy. But the idea we will have to pay for our deeds at the judgement seat is totally false—the debt for our sins was already paid at the cross. And the idea of all our deeds good and bad being seen by everyone, that's not a very pleasant thought, is it? But worst of all, is the notion that you and I will be asked to stand and say something about each other. That's something you do around a campfire at youth camp, but the

only judge at the bema will be Jesus. And He won't be dealing with our sins—He already did that on the cross. Instead He will be evaluating each of us on the basis of what we did with what He gave us. We've been given gifts and abilities, and on that day, we'll be judged according to our stewardship of His gifts. There are two main things that will happen:

### **(1) It will be a time of revelation of the quality of my service to God**

We read in 1 Corinthians 3:13, “It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.” Notice it said the “QUALITY” of each person's work—not the quantity. The Bible uses the metaphor of building a house. The foundation is Jesus Christ. Once Jesus is the foundation of my life, then I start building a superstructure of Christian service upon that foundation. The Bible mentions six kinds of building materials: gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, and straw. But those six materials are divided into two broad groups. Gold, silver, and jewels are precious, permanent materials. They represent all the things we do for Jesus in the power of the Spirit and for the glory of God alone. Wood, hay, and straw are cheaper, perishable materials. They represent all of the Christian service we perform in our own strength and with a desire for people to recognize how good WE are—in other words, we do it for our own glory.

So, when we stand at the bema, each of us will present a building we've built through our Christian service. Then Jesus will look at our building of works, and it will ignite—the quality of our work will be tried by fire. Remember, in Revelation 1, John had a vision of the glorified Christ and John wrote that Jesus' eyes were like a blazing fire (Revelation 1:14). When Jesus gazes at my works, it will be like a laser beam—poof! It will ignite.

What happens to gold, silver, and jewels when they go through fire? They aren't destroyed, they are simply purified—and they remain. So everything I've done in the power of the Spirit and for the glory of God will just be more beautiful and precious for Jesus. But when wood, hay, and straw catches fire not much is left over. Everything I've ever done to receive the attention or praise of others will go up in smoke. Oh, the foundation will remain, but the straw house will be gone.

### **(2) It will also be a time of reward for the faithfulness of my service to God**

After the quality of our service is tried by fire the Bible says, “If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward.” In Matthew 25 Jesus told a story about a business owner who left for an extended trip. He left three of his employees in charge. To one, the owner gave \$5,000, to another he gave \$2,000, and to the third he gave \$1,000—according to their abilities. He said, “Go to work, and see what you can do with that capital.” After a long absence, the owner returned and the employee with \$5,000 said, “Sir, I've doubled it—here's \$10,000 for you.” The owner said, “Great job! Keep it—you're now my partner.” The second employee said, “Sir, I've doubled your money, here's \$4,000.” The owner said, “Great job! Keep it—you're my partner now.” The third employee came forward and said, “Sir, I know how tight-fisted you are and how you hate to lose money, so I put the \$1,000 in a mayonnaise jar and buried it in my back yard. Here's all your money back—\$1,000.” The owner frowned and said, “What? You mean you didn't even buy a CD, or put it in an interest bearing checking account? You're not only lazy, you're wicked—and my money smells like mayonnaise—you're fired.”

Our text says we will receive what is due us for the things we did in this body—whether good or bad. The “bad” deeds aren’t sins—like lying or stealing, but poor stewardship. God has given me gifts and abilities—I will be rewarded on the basis of how faithful I’ve been to use these gifts for the glory of God. Every Christian is a minister—you have God-given gifts and abilities too. If you are a Christian who isn’t serving God, it’s like hiding the Master’s investment in a stinky mayonnaise jar! To whom much is given, much is required.

So, this judgement isn’t about salvation or sin, it’s all about your service. It’s not a time of condemnation it’s a time of commendation. It’s not a time of punishment, but a time of praise. It’s not a time of rebuke, but a time of reward.

#### **Q4: HOW WILL WE REACT?**

According to the words we read in 2 Corinthians 5 and 1 Corinthians 3, there will basically be two different reactions on that day.

##### **(1) It will be a time of rejoicing**

In the parable of the talents, the master says to his faithful servants, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter in to the JOY of your salvation.” As Paul was approaching his death, he was looking forward to the bema. He wrote, “Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing.” (2 Timothy 4:8) Paul wrote that he was looking forward to seeing Jesus because he expected to receive a crown of righteousness. The reward we receive at the bema comes in the form of crowns. There are two words for “crowns” in the New Testament. One is diadema, which means a royal crown. The other is stephanos, which means a garland crown—the kind that was given to runners who had finished the race. So which of those two do you think we’ll receive? Right. Only Jesus will wear a diadema (Revelation 14:14). Our crowns will be like this one—a stephanos.

The New Testament mentions at least five different kinds of crowns—a crown of righteousness; a crown of life; a crown of rejoicing; a crown of glory; and a victor’s crown. If you want to study more about those, just get a concordance and trace the word “crown” in the New Testament.

On that day, when Jesus passes out crowns, there will be great rejoicing in heaven. Have you ever been at an award ceremony? There is a sense of excitement and anticipation, and when the MC announces the winner of an award, there is spontaneous applause. I think that’s going to be the scene at the bema. There are certain people I want to stand around when Jesus starts passing out the crowns, because I want to rejoice in the celebration.

In Matthew 6 Jesus spoke about those people who pray for public recognition and do works for the applause of men—He says that’s ALL the reward they’ll get—man’s applause. But in Matthew 6:6 He said that of those who fast, serve, and pray in secret, “Your Father who sees in secret will REWARD you openly.” Sometimes people have to perform acts of love and service they often say are “thankless jobs.” Maybe you’ve had to take care of a dying loved one. Maybe

you’ve had to live with your mother-in-law or something. Remember, Child of God, there is no thankless job. Your thanks and reward will come later—it will come from Jesus Himself!

## **(2) It will be a time of regret**

The Bible speaks of that individual whose work is composed primarily of wood, hay, and straw. Much of what they did was for show, and with a desire for recognition and credit. Eugene Petersen paraphrases it this way, “Eventually there is going to be an inspection. If you use cheap or inferior materials, you’ll be found out. The inspection will be thorough and rigorous. You won’t get by with a thing. If your work passes inspection, fine; if it doesn’t, your part of the building will be torn out and started over. But you won’t be torn out; you’ll survive—but just barely.” (1 Corinthians 3:10 *The Message*)

John Greenleaf Whittier wrote, “Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, ‘It might have been.’” I really don’t want to stand before Jesus and watch my service burn up into a pile of ashes. The thought of the bema motivates me to serve the Lord more faithfully and more humbly than ever before.

Perhaps you’ve learned some truth about the judgement seat of Christ that you didn’t know before today, but how can this truth set you free? First of all, don’t fear the bema—it’s the greatest award ceremony in the Universe! Second, recommit yourself to let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

I’ve answered five questions about the bema, but there’s one more question you need to ask yourself: So what? What does it mean to me? Our goal should be to please the Lord—to serve Him faithfully, not to earn salvation or to gain rewards for ourselves, but to give Him greater glory now and when we lay our crowns before Him!

The Bible says after we receive our crowns, we’re going to take them off and lay them before Jesus. “The twenty-four elders [that’s us] fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.’” (Revelation 4:10-11)

## **CONCLUSION**

Through the years, when I’ve talked about heavenly rewards or crowns, I’ve encountered some people who display false modesty by saying something like, “I don’t really want any rewards, or crowns—I just want my little corner in heaven. Somebody even wrote a song, “Lord, just build me a little cabin in the corner of gloryland.” If you think you’ll be living alone in your own little cabin on a hilltop, you don’t understand heaven! Our someone may say, “I really don’t want any reward at all—just being there will be my reward.” It’s not about you anyway—it’s about Him. Do you want to stand before Jesus empty-handed while everyone else is casting their crowns before Him? That attitude is sometimes a cover-up for spiritual laziness.

The sound I want to hear in heaven is not the angels rejoicing, or songs of the saints. I want to

hear “beep, beep, beep.” You say, “What’s that?” I don’t know about you, but I want to serve the Lord so diligently and faithfully that I have a dump truck full of crowns. I want to back that thing up to Jesus, beep, beep, beep, and say, “Here, Jesus, this is all for your glory, and your glory alone!”

Won’t it be wonderful after the award service to actually do what we sing about? “We fall down, we lay our crowns at the feet of Jesus. The greatness of mercy and love at the feet of Jesus; and we cry ‘Holy, holy, holy.’”

Opportunities to serve God yesterday are gone, but you have the rest of today and the rest of your life to serve Him, so that when you stand before Him you can cast your crowns at his feet and hear Him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

## OUTLINE

*Bema*: A raised platform where rulings and rewards were publicly announced.

Q1: WHO WILL BE THERE?

A: Only Christians and all Christians

Q2: WHERE AND WHEN WILL IT HAPPEN?

A: In heaven after the rapture and before Christ returns to set up His Kingdom on earth

Q3: WHAT WILL HAPPEN?

It will be a time of

- (1) Revelation of the quality of my service to God
- (2) Reward for the faithfulness of my service to God

Q4: HOW WILL WE REACT?

It will be a time of

- (1) Rejoicing
- or
- (2) Regret





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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes