



Eschatology – A Study of the End Times

Lesson 11: The Church in Heaven

Introduction

With the Rapture of the church, the church has been supernaturally taken by Christ out of the earth to heaven (1 Thess. 4:13–17; John 14:1–3). The seven-year tribulation will soon take place on earth following the rapture, and there will be world-wide destruction. God’s wrath will be unleashed on earth like never seen before. But before we begin to consider what takes place on earth, what will happen to the church once they are raptured to heaven? There are two events that likely occur with the church while in heaven: (1) the judgment seat of Christ and (2) the marriage of the Lamb.

1) The Judgment Seat of Christ¹

When we consider the doctrine of judgment, oftentimes our mind goes to the final judgment. It is true that those who have rejected Christ will spend eternity facing God’s wrath. However, believers will face judgment as well. The Bible teaches that believers will face Christ in judgment. This is different from the Great White Throne Judgment in Revelation 20:11–15. That will be the judgment of the wicked where they will be cast into the lake of fire. We on the other hand will not be separated from God’s favor but will stand before the judgment seat of Christ, which is also called “the bēma seat of Christ.” At the judgment seat of Christ, our personal motives and intentions of the heart will be evaluated.

This idea of the judgment seat goes back to the athletic games from the apostle Paul’s day. Upon the completion of the games, a notable person would sit upon a judgment seat and dispense rewards to those athletes who won. This judgment seat, or bēma seat, was a raised platform, usually mounted by steps, used to make public pronouncement and to award prizes. In the athletic games, the referee sat on a bēma seat, and from that seat he rewarded those contestants who had run seeking to obtain the prize (1 Cor. 9:24). The rewards were usually wreaths made of leaves, which was known as the “victor’s crown.” This is the picture of the judgment seat of Christ.

¹ The following is adapted from *The End Times in Chronological Order* by Ron Rhodes.

- 2 Corinthians 5:10. Who is the Judge that presides over this judgment/bēma seat?

- Romans 14:10–12. What does this passage reveal about who will be the participants of this judgment? _____

This judgment will not determine our salvation. All those who have faith in Christ have their salvation secure in Him. That matter has been settled by Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf on the cross. Nothing will threaten our eternal security because our security does not rest on us but on God.

- John 10:28–30
- Romans 8:1
- Romans 8:29–30
- Romans 8:31–39
- Jude 24

Instead, this judgment has to do with how we live as Christians on earth. At the bēma seat, we will be rewarded for our deeds in this life or suffer loss of rewards.

- 1 Corinthians 3:12–15. What does the building material represent? _____

- What does the fire represent? _____

The Sense of Momentary Shame

It seems that although all of our sins have been paid for and forgiven by Christ, when we stand at the judgment seat of Christ, there will be a momentary sense of shame, regret, and sorrow for not always living to please Christ. Believers will not be shamed by Christ, but this sense of shame will come from our understanding of our failure to always please Christ in all things. All of our works, both good and bad, will be exposed, and Christ will reward us based upon those good works. When our bad works are exposed before our Lord, we will experience momentary shame. Some rewards may be forfeited that otherwise might have been received. This will involve a sense of loss (1 Cor. 3:15) and shame, which will be overcome by eternal joy.

In what sense will the believer experience momentary shame? The judgment seat of Christ might be compared to a commencement ceremony. At graduation there is some measure of disappointment and remorse that one did not do better and work harder. However, at such an event the overwhelming emotion is joy, not remorse. The graduates do not leave the auditorium weeping because they did not earn better grades. Rather, they are thankful that they have graduated, and they are grateful for what they did achieve. To overcome the sorrow aspect of the

judgment seat of Christ is to make heaven hell. To undo the sorrow aspect is to make faithfulness inconsequential.²

The Scope of the Judgment

The judgment of believers will focus on their personal stewardship of the gifts, talents, opportunities, and responsibilities given to them in this lifetime. The character of each Christian's life and service will be laid bare by Christ's omniscient vision (Rev. 1:14).

- Actions. Numerous scripture verses reveal that each of our actions will be judged before the Lord. (Ps. 62:12; Eph. 6:7–8)
- Thoughts. At Christ's judgment seat, He will scrutinize more than just our actions. He will also judge our thoughts. (Jer. 17:10; 1 Cor. 4:5; Rev. 2:23)
- Words. The scope of the believer's judgment will include all the words the believer has spoken (Matt. 12:35–37).

The Timing of the Judgment

The judgment seat of Christ will likely follow the rapture. Scripture does not explicitly spell this out but hints at this. The twenty-four elders in heaven mentioned in Revelation 4 apparently represent church-age believers (Rev. 4:4, 10). This leads us to believe they have already experienced the judgment seat of Christ, where such crowns will be handed out. This means the judgment of believers must take place soon after the rapture.

Furthermore, when the bride of Christ returns to earth with Christ at the Second Coming, she has already been rewarded. She is adorned in "fine linen, bright and pure," which we are told represents "the righteous deeds of the saints" (Rev. 19:8). This also points to the reality that believers in the body of Christ have already been judged, which supports the idea that the judgment seat of Christ follows the rapture but is before the Second Coming of Christ.

2) The Marriage of the Lamb

The marriage of the Lamb will also likely occur following the rapture of the church and before the Second Coming of Christ, when He establishes the millennial kingdom. Scripture portrays Christ as a divine Bridegroom (John 3:29) and the church as the bride of Christ (Rev. 19:7).

The backdrop to this imagery is rooted in Hebrew weddings, which consisted of three phases:

1. The marriage was legally consummated by the bride and groom's parents, after which the groom went to prepare a place to live in his father's house.
2. The bridegroom came to claim his bride at an unannounced time.
3. There was a marriage supper—a feast lasting several days.

All three of these phases are seen in Christ's relationship to the church:

² Samuel Hoyt, "The Judgment Seat of Christ in Theological Perspective," Part 2, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, electronic media.

1. As individuals living during the church age come to salvation, under the Father's loving and sovereign hand, they become a part of the bride of Christ (or the church). Meanwhile, Christ the Bridegroom is in heaven, preparing a place to live in the Father's house (John 14:1–3).
2. The Bridegroom (Jesus Christ) will come at an undisclosed time to claim His bride at the rapture. He will then take the bride back to heaven where He has prepared a place to live (John 14:1–3). The marriage ceremony will take place in heaven before the second coming (Rev. 19:6–10).
3. The marriage supper of the Lamb will be celebrated following the second coming.

Application

1. Give thanks to God for our security in Christ.
2. Live to please the Lord in all things (1 Cor. 10:31; 2 Cor. 5:9; Rom. 12:1–2).