

Judgment Motifs in the Messages to the Seven Churches

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Introduction

Eschatological judgment is a topic relevant to every believer. While there is a consensus among Christians that the righteous will inherit eternal life, there is a divergence of opinions as to what will happen to the wicked. Four main views are discernible. First, the dominant view through the centuries has been that the wicked will be literally tormented by fire in hell for eternity with no respite.¹ Everlasting fiery torment is not so palatable to the modern mindset and therefore a second trend has developed whereby hell is perceived as symbolic of a state of conscious existence apart from God.² Third, a minority of commentators believe that the wicked will be destroyed in the Day of Judgment and whatever suffering hell entails will be temporal and will come to an end. The fires of hell serve primarily to

¹ E.g. Robert W. Landis, *The Immortality of the Soul and the Final Condition of the Wicked Carefully Considered* (New York, Carlton and Porter, 1859); Harry Buis, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*, (Presbyterian and Reformed Pub., 1957); Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2001); David Pawson, *The Road to Hell* (True Potential Publishing, 2008); Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 265-74.

² E.g. William Crockett, et al., *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

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destroy rather than torment.³ Fourth, an even smaller minority believes that eventually all will be saved, perhaps even Satan.⁴

Eschatological judgment has been a key doctrine in Christian theology and as such the topic has been frequently approached in a systematizing, rather than an exegetical way. Moreover, discussion often focuses on a sampling of key texts like the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the sayings of Jesus especially in the Synoptic Gospels, the second half of the book of Revelation and a few other scattered texts from the General Epistles and/or Paul. However, judgment is a prominent motif throughout Scripture and the discussion on hell will benefit if a broader Scriptural basis is established. To this end this short study aims to contribute.

Our focus will be the letters to the seven churches in Revelation (Rev 2:1-3:22). The letters constitute the first heptadic prophecy of Revelation and one that has received multidimensional interpretations. In the original *sitz im leben* the seven letters were addressed to seven literal churches in the time of John⁵ that were facing issues which John wrote to address. As such they have a localized application. Going a step further, the historicist approach maintains a broader historical application whereby each of the seven churches represents one era in the history of the Christian Church beginning with the time of John and the other apostles and reaching all the way to the end of the age.⁶ A third line of approach that is complementary rather than antagonistic to the previous two, and is foundational to this study, is that the messages to all the churches have an application to believers of all times, i.e., believers or groups of believers may exemplify the characteristics of any of the churches and may therefore need the

³ E.g. Henry Constable, *The Duration and Nature of Future Punishment* (London: Hobbs and Hammond, 1886); Leroy Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of our Fathers* (2 vols.; Review and Herald, 1965); John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (Intervarsity Press, 1974); Edward Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: a Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, iUniverse, 2000; David Powys and Graham Stanton, *Hell: a Hard Look at a Hard Question: The Fate of the Unrighteous in New Testament Thought*, Paternoster Theological Monographs, 1998.

⁴ E.g. Edward H. Plumptre, *The Spirits in Prison*. Isaac A. Dorner, *System der Christlichen Glaubenslehre*. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III: 2 602-4,587-640; IV: 1 8-12, 20-25,306,356,550; IV:2 270,296,314,509. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:407-418.

⁵ M. S. Mills, *Revelations: An Exegetical Study of the Revelation to John* (Dallas, TX: 3E Ministries, 1997), Re 2:1.

⁶ Mills, *Revelations*, Re 2:1.

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relevant counsel. This approach is supported by the fact that Jesus promises to come to all the churches, suggesting that they all exist in some form to the end of the age.⁷ As such, the eschatological dimensions of the messages to all the churches are relevant to a study on the topic of hell.

The study will proceed as follows. First it will discuss briefly the literary structure of the seven churches where parallels between churches become evident. Then it will discuss the eschatological dimensions of each parallel group giving emphasis to both warnings of judgment and promises of reward, since one is often juxtaposed with the other.

Literary Parallels

Ranko Stefanovic has observed that the order of the seven churches reflects a parallel between the first and last, second and sixth, third and fifth with Thyatira, the fourth, as the apex.⁸ The following symmetric arrangements are visible in relation to the warnings.

- A. Ephesus: removal of lampstand from its place (2:5)
- B. Smyrna: (no direct warning)
- C. Pergamum: will come quickly and make war (2:16)
- D. Thyatira: I will kill her children (2:22, 23)
- C¹. Sardis: come like a thief, not know when I come (3:3)
- B¹. Philadelphia: (no direct warning)
- A¹. Laodicea: spit you out of the mouth (3:16)

As can be noted in the above structure, the message to Ephesus, though worded differently, corresponds to that of Laodicea; that of Pergamum to Sardis; and the absence of a direct warning to Smyrna with a similar absence to Philadelphia. Thyatira forms the climax of this arrangement. The promises manifest a similar structure.

⁷ Taylor G. Bunch, *The Seven Epistles of Christ* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association), 107-108.

⁸ Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002), 76. Stefanovic sees the seven churches as corresponding to the seven arms of the lampstand in the temple (cf. Exo d 25:32; 37:18, 19; Num 8:2; Zech 4:2,11). Such a correlation should be seen as loose rather than absolute in view of the fact that Jesus is depicted as walking “among them” (Rev 1:12-13; 2:1).

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- A. Ephesus: the right to eat from tree of life in paradise (2:7)
- B. Smyrna: the crown of life, not hurt by second death (2:10, 11)
- C. Pergamum: the hidden manna, a white stone, a new name (2:17)
- D. Thyatira: authority over nations, rule with an iron scepter,
give the morning star (2:26, 27)
- C¹. Sardis: not blot out the name from the book of life;
will walk in white (3:5)
- B¹. Philadelphia: hold crown, a pillar in the temple, never to leave (3:11, 12)
- A¹. Laodicea: the right to sit and eat with Jesus (3:20, 21)

From the above structure of promises, it is evident that a similar parallel exists between Ephesus and Laodicea, Smyrna and Philadelphia, and Pergamum and Sardis. This again points to Thyatira as the climax. In light of these parallels in warning and promises, we will structure the discussion accordingly, A, A¹; B, B¹; C, C¹; D.

Warnings and Promises to Ephesus and Laodicea

Because Ephesus has lost her first live, Jesus gives her the following warning: “I am coming to you” [ἐρχομαί σοι], “and will remove [κινήσω] your lampstand out of its place unless you repent” (Rev 2:5).⁹ The removal of the lampstand and the timing of its removal have been variously interpreted. For some, it has only a temporal dimension and implies that the local church in Ephesus would die out. They see no reference to eschatological judgment.¹⁰ For others, the message has an application beyond the immediate historical confines, all the way to the end of time.

⁹ All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ Steve Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997), Re 2:1-7. See also Aune, *Revelation 1-5:14: Word Biblical Commentary* (vol. 52A; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 147. Aune observes that the warning to Ephesus is nothing less than a threat to obliterate the Ephesian congregation as an empirical Christian community. See also Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation: Sacra Pagina* (vol. 16; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 55. Harrington saw the threat as referring to the church’s falling under the deadening sway of the temple of Artemis.

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These perceive the promise ἔρχομαί σοι as a reference to the Second Coming.¹¹

The lampstand threatened to be removed from its place is one of the seven in whose midst John had seen the risen Christ (Rev 1:12, 13; 2:1). They represent the seven churches (1:19). Christ thus warns to visit Ephesus and remove it from its place. To fully grasp the significance of the statement it is important to understand a few key words. The word ἔρχομαι means “to come” and “to go,” both literally and figuratively.¹² It is often used of the occurrence of fateful happenings.¹³ In the phrase ἔρχομαί σοι, the dative pronoun is used to imply disadvantage.¹⁴ Thus, there seems to be hostility emphasized; Christ comes to judge the church negatively if it does not repent of her sins.

The verb κινήσω is an indicative future active from κινῶ, meaning “to move,” “move away,” or “remove.”¹⁵ It appears in the context of a first class conditional statement that assumes truth for the sake of argument.¹⁶ This means that if Ephesus does not repent, its removal from among the seven lampstands in whose midst Christ walks will be the sure result (1:12-13). Hence, a deep seriousness underlies this statement. Ephesus will be rejected if she does not repent.¹⁷ She will be separated from Christ who is the source of its life and existence.

The removing or putting out of a lamp is a symbol of death, loss and destruction. In 2 Sam 21:17, for example, David is compared to a lamp, “the lamp of Israel.” After David was nearly killed in battle (2 Sam 21:16) David’s men request him not to go to battle with them again lest he die and

¹¹ J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (vol. 20; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 71.

¹² Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament: Baker's Greek New Testament Library* (vol. 4; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 173.

¹³ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)* (vols. 5-10; Gerhard Friedrich et al., eds., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 2:666.

¹⁴ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 142-143. See Aune, *Revelation 1-5:14*, 135.

¹⁵ Friberg, Barbara Friberg and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* 4: 230.

¹⁶ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 450.

¹⁷ *TDNT*, 3:718.

the lamp of Israel go out.¹⁸ Similarly, God and His word are depicted as the light of His people, and when they do not shine, the people perish (Job 29:1; Psa 17:29; 119:105; Prov 6:23). The removal of the lampstand therefore should be understood as a metaphor of removal from the presence of Christ who is the source of life, and therefore death. This is evident also from a comparison with the promise given to Ephesus.

The promise given to overcomers is described as follows: “I will grant [δῶσω] to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God” (Rev 2:7). A brief analysis of a few key words will make this promise more vivid. The verb δῶσω is an indicative future active from δίδωμι, “to give.” As it stands in the passage, δῶσω, “I will give/grant,” is a predictive future that shows what Christ will give to the overcomers in the future.¹⁹ The tree of life is mentioned four times in Revelation (2:7; 22:2, 14, 19). The right to partake of its fruit is a reversal of what happened in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve, having sinned, were denied the right to eat from the tree of life. The end result was death (Gen 3:22-24). Paradise is a loanword from Persian meaning “enclosure” or “park.”²⁰ The Greeks used the term for the parks of Persian kings,²¹ while in the *LXX* it refers to the Garden of Eden as a technical religious term.²² In Jewish literature it is portrayed as a future inheritance of the righteous when they shall again receive immortality as a restoration of God’s original intention for humankind that was frustrated by sin.²³

It is evident from the above that both the language of warning and of promise revolve around the concept of life. Removal of the lampstand signifies removal from Christ, the source of all life, and therefore removal of life itself. The promise by contrast offers a full restoration to life without the prospect of death as was intended in Eden. No intimations of torment are given to Ephesus; the choice is between life and death.

The parallel message to Laodicea entails similar concepts. The warning to boastful Laodicea is “because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth” (Rev 3:16). To spit is a coarse figure

¹⁸ Cf. 2 Chron 21:7; Job 18:6; 21:17.

¹⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 568.

²⁰ *TDNT*, 5: 765.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² E.g. Gen 2:8,9,10,15,16; 3:1,2,3,8,10.

²³ 1 En 25:5; 3 En 23:18; T. Levi 18:11; Apoc. Mos. 28:4. Aune, *Revelation 1-5: 14,151*.

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of speech meaning to completely reject.²⁴ Thus, though the verb “to spit out,” ἐμέσαι, is different from κινήσω, used of Ephesus, the end result is not dissimilar. Both what is moved from its place and what is vomited are rejected. The idea of spitting out or vomiting harkens back to similar motifs in the OT that refer to the violent destruction of the Canaanites from the land because of their sinfulness, and for rejecting the long suffering of God (Lev 18:25, 28; cf. Gen 15:16); also to the potential fate of the Israelites if they followed the paths of the Canaanites (Lev 18:28; 20:22). The motif of vomit implies that there is no reversal of the verdict (Prov 26:11; 2 Pet 2:22) and may reflect Jesus’ words: “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men” (Matt 5:13). The finality of the verdict suggests an eschatological rather than temporal judgment. The image of Jesus vomiting appears undignified and shocking and its use here warns the church that He is not to be taken lightly.²⁵

Laodicea is the last church among the seven. The language of vomit probably entails a sense of urgency. Lukewarm water may cause an immediate reaction in the body. Likewise, the lukewarmness of Laodicea will result in a swift response; judgment will not tarry.²⁶ It at once portrays the decisiveness of God’s negative verdict of a people unfaithful to God’s faithful and true witness, who is in fact the standard of eschatological judgment.²⁷ So in terms of warning, both the messages to Ephesus and Laodicea spell ejection and death. They emphasize a removal from Christ who alone has the key of death.

Those in Laodicea who repent and are victorious will fellowship with Christ. This fellowship is described in two complementary statements: “I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with me” (3:20); “I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (3:21). The picture of Jesus standing

²⁴ Aune, *Revelation 1-5:14*, 258.

²⁵ Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views*, Rev 3:14-22.

²⁶ Grant R. Osborn, *Revelation: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 206.

²⁷ Robert W. Wall, *Revelation: New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 86. See William Barclay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (Great Britain, London: SCM Press, 1957), 116. Barclay adds that Laodicea will be absolutely and totally rejected.

at the door seems to point to the end of the age when the saints will be taken to be with Him (John 14:1-3; cf. Matt 24:33; Mark 13:29). At the same time the fellowship meal points forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:7-9; cf. Matt 22:1-14).²⁸ It also functions as a contrast to the warning of being spat out. Spitting out brings to mind horrible food or drink and an unpleasant, uncomfortable atmosphere both for the one who spits out and for everyone else who might be watching. By contrast, the idea of meal fellowship touches the more sensitive chords of love and warmth. The meal language also points back to Ephesus. While Ephesus is promised to eat from the tree of life so she can now live with Jesus for eternity, Laodicea is likewise promised to dine with Jesus in the eschatological, eternal banquet. The sense of eternity is reinforced by the mention of the throne of the Father and Jesus and the seating of the saints in their presence.

Promises to Smyrna and Philadelphia

Smyrna and Philadelphia are the two churches that receive no rebuke or direct warning. The absence of a warning to Smyrna should not lead us to conclude that Smyrna is a church at peace. The text indicates that Smyrna was to go through persecution even to the point of death and is thus admonished to remain faithful (2:10). Persecution perhaps played a major role in purifying the church and may explain the lack of warning.²⁹

The phrase ἄχρι θανάτου in the phrase “be faithful *until death*” occurs three times in the NT (Acts 22:4; Rev 2:10; 12:11). The emphasis is that believers were to remain faithful to the point where might actually be killed, not just threatened with death.³⁰ It is also important to note that they are urged to maintain the faithfulness which they already have so as to receive the promise of life. If they do not, they might lose their crowns. Thus, though Smyrna does not receive any direct warning, there is an indirect one in the call to persevere.

The promise given to those who remain faithful is that they will not be hurt by the second death; instead they will receive a crown of life (2:10,

²⁸ For reasons why the phrase “I will come into him” should not be understood primarily as an offering of salvation in a temporal context see Wallace, 380-2.

²⁹ Bunch, *The Seven Epistles of Christ*, 142.

³⁰ In Acts 22:4 Paul explains how he persecuted Christians “until death;” in Rev 12:11 it refers to believers who were willing to choose death over life in faithfulness to Christ. Cf. Stefanovic, 120-21. Cf. Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1986), 71.

11). The promise to the overcomers contrasts with the likelihood of temporal death in persecution. Thus, those who remain faithful and might, as a result, face death, will not be hurt by the second death (2:11). The phrase “second death” occurs four times and only in Revelation (2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). Barclay calls this a mysterious phrase.³¹ In the three texts apart from 2:11 it refers to the lake of fire. While some have understood the lake of fire to refer to everlasting torment on the basis of Rev 20:10,³² more likely it leads to the complete annihilation of the wicked.³³ Four facts point strongly in this direction. First, death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 20:14). These impersonal entities cannot be tormented and the force of the saying is that death and Hades will come to an end, i.e. God will put an end to death since it was not part of His original intent for Creation. Second, the very fact that the lake of fire is called the “second death” indicates that the result is death, not everlasting suffering. Third, immediately after the scene of the lake of fire in Rev 20:14-15 John sees a restored Creation (Rev 21:1-5) in which there are no more tears, death, crying or pain (Rev 21:4) a picture that definitely excludes an everlasting hell of incomprehensible torment. Fourth, within the context of the message to Smyrna, there is clearly a parallel with the faithfulness of believers “until death” and the ensuing promise that they will not be harmed by the “second death.” So while the first one is temporal, the second death is permanent.

The escape from the second death is presented in a very emphatic way. The Greek οὐ μὴ ἀδικηθῆ, “shall not be hurt” (Rev 2:11) is a combination of οὐ μὴ plus the aorist. This is an emphatic negation, indeed the strongest way to negate something.³⁴ Thus, not only will those who remain faithful

³¹ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John* (vol. 1; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2000), 84.

³² The basis for such an understanding is the phrase εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων, often translated “forever and ever.” Though this phrase poses some problems, there is a growing recognition that the noun αἰών and the cognate adjective αἰώνιος by NT times had more to do with quality than quantity. They refer to things that are of the coming age, where God’s reign is supreme, as opposed to the corrupt current age and as such refer to things coming from that age, to things of divine origin. See relevant discussions see Anthony. Tomasino, עב״ The *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology* (vol. 3; gen. ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 345-50; T. Holtz, *An Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (vol. 1; eds., H. Balz and G. Schneider; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 44-6.

³³ Stefanovic, 120.

³⁴ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 468.

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to the point of death not be hurt by the second death, but this emphatic negation rules out even the idea of death as being a possibility in the future in a most decisive way.³⁵ Christ gives further assurances of life when He states that those who remain faithful will receive the “crown of life” (Rev 2:10). Stefanovic observes that this is not the crown of kings but the crown of victory,³⁶ the wreath or garland given to winners in the Olympic and other games. NT writers contrasted the perishable wreath of Olympic winners, with the imperishable wreath believers will receive at the end of the age.³⁷ The former was coveted by those who knew not God but the latter is of much more infinite value for it entails eternal life with God. The phrase “crown of life” occurs twice in the NT (James 1:12; Rev 2:10). In both cases it is a future reality to those who remain faithful to the very end. Overcomers did not fear him who can only kill the body, but He who can as well cast into hell (Mat 10:28; Luke 12:4, 5).

Thus, the eschatological promise to Smyrna like the one to the two churches already discussed revolves around the concepts of life and death. The second death which entails the cessation of life will be powerless on them because of their faithfulness to the end. Everlasting torment has no place in this picture.

To Philadelphia, like Smyrna, no message of warning is given. The church is instead admonished to hold on to what she has, just as those in Smyrna were asked to remain faithful until death. What is promised, like in Smyrna, is a “crown” (3:11; cf. 2:10). Furthermore, the overcomers are promised to be made pillars in God’s temple forever (Rev 3:12). The symbolism of being made a pillar in God’s temple reflects Rev 7:15-17 where the saints worship God day and night in His heavenly temple. Thus, living in God’s temple could be viewed as a symbol for eternal salvation (cf. Ps 23:6).³⁸

The Greek for temple is *ναός*. It derives from the verb *ναίω*, “to dwell,” or “inhabit.”³⁹ In non biblical texts it refers to the “abode of the gods.”⁴⁰ The noun has cultic nuances and refers to a temple and more narrowly to the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Stefanovic, 120.

³⁷ See Cor 9:25; cf Jam 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4; 2 Tim 4:8.

³⁸ Michaels, *Revelation*, Re 3:7.

³⁹ *TDNT*, 4:880.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

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innermost shrine that would house the image of the god.⁴¹ In biblical usage *ναός*, common in both the LXX and NT, refers to God's abode in His temple, whether in heaven or on earth, primarily the inner structure not the whole complex.⁴² It can also refer to believers either individually (1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19) or corporately (2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21; possibly 2 Thess 2:4) but only in the sense that God dwells in them just like He dwells in His literal temple. Thus, the notion of being made pillars in the temple points to dwelling permanently there. Overcomer will never be separated from the source of life who is Jesus Himself.

Furthermore, the overcomer will "never go out from it [temple] anymore" (Rev 3:11). Clearly, this is not language of restriction but of assurance. David longed to "dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Ps 23:6) a place He considered safe (Ps 27:4) because the Lord dwells there (Ps 11:4; Hab 2:20) and from there He hears His people's cries (2 Sam 22:7; Psa 18:6). Also, in His temple, God satisfies with His goodness (Ps 65:4). The temple in view here is the heavenly temple, located in the New Jerusalem where God welcomes believers and gives them a new name (Rev 3:12). As such, in the promise to the faithful Philadelphians, the hopes of the OT saints reach a grander fulfillment. By contrast, exclusion from the city of God leads to destruction (Rev 20:9; 22:15). To be in the city and/or temple as opposed to outside may also reflect the language of exclusion exemplified in the outer darkness sayings of Jesus where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Such language though often associated with the supposed torments of hell, rightly understood points to exclusion from the kingdom with no notion of temporary, let alone everlasting torment.⁴³

⁴¹ *TDNT*, 4: 625.

⁴² E.g. Ps 45:15; Matt 23:16, 21; Luke 1:21; Rev 3:12; 7:15; 11:19

⁴³ The outer darkness appears three times (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) and is assumed twice more (Matt 24:51; Luke 13:28), through the use of the locative *ἐκεῖ*, often in conjunction with the phrase weeping and gnashing of teeth. Often overlooked is the fact that the outer darkness always appears in the context of a stated or implied banquet, in which case the outer darkness is the darkness outside the banqueting hall, not a description of hell. Furthermore, weeping habitually describes sorrow, while gnashing of teeth, always anger, never torment of any kind. Taking the above together, the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth describes the exclusion of sinners from the kingdom and the resultant anger and sorrow they experience, not hell or torments of any kind.

Warnings and Promises to Pergamum and Sardis

To the church of Pergamum, the message is that unless she repents, Christ will come quickly and fight them with the sword of His mouth (2:16). This “coming,” like that of Rev 2:5 has a twofold application. First, it may refer to a temporal “coming,” a divine visitation upon Pergamum’s unrighteous conduct.⁴⁴ In other words Christ would not allow the situation prevailing in the church to go unchecked. Second, in the broader, universal understanding of the messages to the seven churches, the coming can mean nothing less than the Parousia, the coming of Jesus in glory. Thus, the ἔρχομαί σοι ταχὺ, “I am coming to you quickly,” parallels closely the ἔρχομαι ταχὺ, of Rev 22:7,12 (cf. Rev 16:15; 22:20), clear references to the Second Coming. The two interpretations are not contradictory since God’s interventions of judgment in history mirror His grander intervention at the end of the age.

At His coming, Jesus warns Pergamum that He will “make war against them with the sword of [His] mouth.” The sword coming out of the mouth looks back to the description of the heavenly Christ in Rev 1:16 and, more importantly, ties the warning to Pergamum with the eschatological war of Rev 19 where the sword is mentioned twice (Rev 19:15, 21). The war of Rev 19 is a representation of the Second Coming and the sword signals the utter annihilation of the enemies of God (Rev 19:21). Military language is a common symbol for the Day of the Lord and the result is always destruction.⁴⁵

As far as the promises to Pergamum are concerned, Christ promises to overcome the hidden manna, as well as a white stone with a new name on it (2:17). With regards to the hidden manna, some view it as reflecting popular later Jewish expectation that God would again provide manna.⁴⁶ This would point to a future time but not necessarily to the end of the age.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Anthony C. Garland, *A Testimony of Jesus Christ: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Galaxies Software, 2006; 2006), Rev 2:16. See also Stefanovic, who compares the coming of Jesus to the coming of the angel with the sword against Balaam, a fitting parallel given that Balaam is specifically mentioned in the message to Pergamum (Rev 2:14).

⁴⁵ James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains (DBLG): Greek New Testament* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), DBLG 4482-4483, #2; Friberg, Barbara Friberg and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, 4: 321.

⁴⁶ Harrington, *Revelation*, 63.

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For others, however, it is a symbol of eschatological fulfillment.⁴⁷ This becomes evident when connected with John 6:31-34 where manna is used symbolically to represent both the abundant spiritual life in Christ now, and the eternal life He offers at the end of the age (John 6:32, 33).⁴⁸ The origin of manna is from the exodus of Israel from Egypt and shows how God lovingly and supernaturally provided sustenance for His people. Manna looked like white coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey (Exod 16:31; Num 11:7). God provided manna for a period of forty years (Exod 16:35) until Israel crossed the Jordan (Jos. 5:12). Manna provided life in a barren wilderness and without it Israel might have died (Exod 16:3). The fact that it is called “angel’s food” (Ps 78:23-25) probably indicates that at least in part the fulfillment points to eternal life. Since some manna was kept in the ark of the covenant (Exod 16:33) in the sanctuary/temple, its mention creates a link to the heavenly temple language of the promise to Philadelphia., i.e. those who find themselves in the heavenly temple of God, will partake of heavenly food.

As regards the “white stone,” it should be seen as a token of vindication or acquittal, in line with the practice of judges to give an accused person either a black stone signifying conviction or a white stone indicating exoneration.⁴⁹ Thus the understanding would be that no matter what verdict a Roman court may give to Christians, they will be vindicated at the bar of eternal justice. An alternative view suggests that the white stone was a token given to successful contestants in Greek games, to be traded in later for their actual awards.⁵⁰ A third alternative is that a white stone with a person’s name written upon it served as a sort of pass for admission to certain functions, like the feasts in temples.⁵¹ If this view is correct, the meaning here would be that those who repent will receive “a pass” admitting them into the messianic feast of the kingdom and the heavenly temple of God.⁵² Therefore, the eating from the hidden manna and the

⁴⁷ Wall, *Revelation*, 76.

⁴⁸ Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary (SDABC)* (vol. 7; Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002), 750.

⁴⁹ Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views*, Rev 2:12-17.

⁵⁰ Taylor G. Bunch, *The Seven Epistles of Christ* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1947), 157.

⁵¹ William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 62, 63.

⁵² *Ibid.* See Wall, *Revelation*, 76.

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receiving of a stone with a new name can only refer to the reception of the gift of immortal life at Christ's Second Coming.

The giving of a new name has reference to past Scripture references where persons' names were changed. Some good examples include that of Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah (Gen 17:5, 15-16), and Jacob to Israel (Gen 32:27, 28). A name often stands for character, and a new name would indicate a new character. Hence, in the promise of a "new name," the Christian is being assured of a new and different character, patterned after that of God (Isa 62:2; 65:15).

To the church of Sardis, the message is "I will come like a thief." This thief motif language employs imagery elsewhere associated with the Second Coming of Christ (Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev 16:15). However, some see a possibility that some more immediate visitation of judgment is described here.⁵³ Thus, the failure to watch seems to be the reason that they will not know what hour Christ will come (v. 3) upon them, whereas, in the case of the Second Coming of Christ, even for those who are watching, He will come "at an hour you do not expect" (Matt 24:42, 44). That caveat aside, the emphasis seems to be on preparedness and unpreparedness for the Parousia. Thus, while believers are admonished to always be ready (Matt 24:44; Luke 12:40), Sardis' potential failure to remain will mean that when Christ appears unannounced, she will not be ready to meet Him. There is also possibly a parallel to the saying of the thief who comes to steal and destroy (John 10:10). Thus, Jesus' coming to the unrepentant in the eschatological judgment can only bring death. Furthermore, the effects of Christ coming quickly to Pergamum and His coming like a thief to Sardis are the same. To both He comes unexpectedly, at the time they are not looking for Him. To both He comes to potentially judge negatively.

Like all other churches discussed above, that of Sardis also receives promises for the overcomers. Thus, for those who have not soiled their garments, the promise is that walk with Christ, "in white; for they are worthy." The promise continues: "He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels (Rev 3:4, 5). In the above words, a sharp contrast is made between those who have

⁵³ Craig S. Keener, *Revelation: The New American Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 144; Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views*, Rev 3:1-6.

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soiled their garments and those dressed in white. While defiled garments may be a symbol of moral defilement (Matt 22:11; Rev 16:15), white garments refer to the morally faithful and thus clean and unstained, a symbol of purity. The same symbol is again employed in Rev 7:13, 14 where we see the redeemed stand before the throne presented as having washed their garments in the blood of the Lamb. They have received the righteousness that only Christ can give. Elsewhere, both in Scripture and in Jewish literature white garment is depicted as the attire of heavenly beings.⁵⁴ When applied to the saints, this could symbolize the gift of immortality (1 Cor 15:40-44; cf. vs. 51-54).⁵⁵ All in all, white garments symbolize a range of positive traits that center on the notion of ritual and moral purity.⁵⁶

Furthermore, overcomers are assured of the maintenance of their name in the book of life. The idea of erasure of a name from the book of life makes allusion to Moses' intercession for the Israelites when God was contemplating the destruction of Israel (Exod 32:32). The same notion can be seen in the experience of Paul though he does not use the exact words (Rom 9:2,3). The motif of a Book of Life in which the names of the saved are written and the motif of the erasure of a person's name from such a Book nullifies the idea of "once-saved-always-saved" (Rev 17:8).⁵⁷

Finally, rather than erase the name, Jesus promised to instead acknowledge one's name before His father and His holy angels (Rev 3:5). The term *ὁμολογέω* means "to confess," or "to make an emphatic assertion" (Matt 7:23; 14:7; John 1:20; Acts 7:17; 24:14).⁵⁸ In the book of Revelation, the term is only used once. The idea of confessing one's name before God and the angels is also found in Jesus' sayings in the Gospels (Matt 10:32; Luke 12:8). Here too, like in Revelation the idea comes in the context of eschatological judgment. So, those whose names are confessed are those judged as worthy for eternal life and fit to live with God and His angels.

⁵⁴ E.g. Dan. 7:9; 2 Macc 11:8; Matt 28:3; Mark 16:5; John 20:12; Acts 1:10; Rev. 4:4; 6:11; 19:14.

⁵⁵ *SDABC*, 7: 757.

⁵⁶ Aune, *Revelation 1-5:14*, 223.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Swanson, *DBLG*: 3933, #3.

Warnings and Promises to Thyatira

The message to the church of Thyatira seems to be the climax of the messages to the seven churches. It is to this church that Christ reveals Himself as the Son of God and informs her that His eyes are like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass (v. 18). Both of these characteristics suggest impending judgment.⁵⁹ Christ's dealing with the church could be summed up as "penetrative judgment."⁶⁰ His piercing vision sees all and His feet, with which He will tread upon the wicked in the winepress of God's wrath (14:19f; Isa 63:1-4), are of irresistible strength.⁶¹ Jesus will judge the wicked in the church with a judgment none can prevent or defy. The message to Thyatira is, "I will cast [βάλλω] her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. And I will kill her children with pestilence" (Rev 2:22-23). The language of judgment is very strong.

The noun θλίψις translated here as "tribulation" is used 40 times in the NT outside the book of Revelation,⁶² while in Revelation it is used only 5 times (1:9; 2:9, 10, 22; 7:14) making a total of 45. It is used predominantly of the tribulations believers suffered either as a result of persecution or simply by living in a sinful world. Here is the only instance where the cause of the tribulation appears to be Jesus. There is a question as to whether this tribulation is punitive or serves to bring Thyatira to repentance. It could be understood as punitive in the sense that it follows on 2:21 where Jesus declares that Jezebel did not repent.⁶³ Conversely, the last clause of 2:22 which is a warning to repent could be understood to imply that the tribulation is a last resort to get Thyatira to repent, in a similar vein to Hebrews 12:6 where "whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives."

⁵⁹ Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views*, Rev 2:18-29. See H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1920), 53. Ironside argues that Christ's descriptive appearance here speaks of His holiness and righteousness. He must judge all that is evil and yet He never overlooks what can be commended.

⁶⁰ Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 62.

⁶¹ Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views*, Re 2:18-29.

⁶² Matt 13:21; 24:9, 21, 29; Mark 4:7; 13:19, 24; John 16:21, 33; Acts 7:10, 11; 11:19; 14:22; 20:23; Rom 2:9; 5:3*2; 8:35; 12:12; 1 Cor 7:28; 2 Cor 1:4*2, 8; 2:4; 4:17; 6:4; 7:4; 8:2, 13; Eph 3:13; Phil 1:17; 14:14; Col 1:24; 1 Thess 1:6; 3:3, 7; 2 Thess 1:4, 6; Heb 10:33; Jas 1:27.

⁶³ Joseph J. Battistone, *Revelation 1-11, God's Church in a Hostile World* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1989), 44.

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The tribulation could be either historical or eschatological or both. The fact that the tribulation of Thyatira could suggest a localized, historical tribulation is indicated by the fact that other churches would come to an understanding of the justice of God (Rev 2:23). Conversely, tribulation plays a prominent role in the unfolding events of Revelation before the Parousia (e.g. Rev 13:11-18). In a multidimensional understanding of the letters to the seven churches perhaps the tribulation in view might also be understood as multidimensional.

The verb βάλλω translated here as “cast,” is often used in scenes of judgment in the Gospels. In such contexts it can have the idea of “casting” in fire (Matt 3:10), or Gehenna (Matt 5:29), and “casting out” of the kingdom (Matt 5:13).⁶⁴ Here, by contrast, those associating themselves with Jezebel will be thrown into a bed. Throwing one into a sickbed is seen as a Hebrew idiom that means “to cast upon a bed of illness,” thus punishing someone with various forms of sickness.⁶⁵ The motif may also point back to Exod 21:18-20 where an injured or sick person falls in bed, contrasting thus the bed of fornication with the bed of affliction.⁶⁶ While, however, in Exod 21:18-20 there was likelihood for the injured person to recover, here the sure result will be death.

The burden of Exod 21:18-20 was that any punishment would be commensurate to the offence. This might indeed be the concept here as well. Jezebel deserved death because of her idolatry (1 Kgs 16:28-19:3) and received her due reward when Jehu destroyed her and those who followed her into Baal worship (2 Kings 9:30-37; 10:1-28). The idea of the punishment being commensurate to the offence is common in the NT in general (1 Cor 3:8; 1 Tim 5:18; 2 Tim 4:14; Heb 2:2; 2 John 1:8) and Revelation in particular (Rev 18:18; 22:12). The reference to Jezebel is clearly symbolic and the casting of Jezebel on the sickbed of suffering depicts judgment that is connected with the coming of Jesus, thus eschatological.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ TDNT, 1:527.

⁶⁵ Aune, *Revelation 1-5:14*, 205.

⁶⁶ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 52; Michaels, *Revelation*, 79; Wall, *Revelation*, 78. Wall argues that Christ’s threat to cast Jezebel into a bed of suffering may indicate that the false teacher champions the opposite, which is an end from suffering.

⁶⁷ Aune, *Revelation 1-5:14*, 214.

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Since the name Jezebel is used symbolically in the letter to Thyatira, the reference to “her children” must also be used symbolically to refer to believers who had followed after the false teachings of the symbolic Jezebel. The followers of Jezebel’s teachings were to be struck dead with a plague. Since children assume a future, their being killed denotes a lack of one. This seems to point to a complete extermination of all associated with Thyatira’s evil. So not only would Jezebel herself be punished; but her children as well, a sign of a complete destruction. There is finality in this language in terms of dealing with evil, once and for all.

Again, the question arises of whether temporal or eschatological killing is in view. The fact that other churches come to “know” God’s justice (Rev 2:23) as a result of the destruction of Jezebel’s followers may suggest a temporal context. However, it is more likely that the final judgment is in view. Jesus declares that all the churches will come to know that Jesus will give each one “according to your deeds,” “κατὰ τὰ ἔργα ὑμῶν” (2:23). The syntactical construction “κατὰ τὰ ἔργα” with a relevant pronoun appears nine times in the NT predominantly in an eschatological context with a view to the Day of Judgment.⁶⁸ As such, it is best understood in the same way here.

As already observed, to the church of Thyatira, Christ identifies Himself clearly as the Son of God. In addition, He also mentions His judgment of death to this church when He says, “I will kill her children.” Furthermore, it is only to this church where He clearly gives a warning that has a universal application; “and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds” (Rev 2:23). Here we see that just as Jesus is the Son of God to all the churches, He will punish with death all that will not repent in any of the seven churches which are actually symbolic of the Christian church as a whole.

⁶⁸ Rom 2:6; 2 Cor 11:15; 2 Tim 4:14; Rom 2:23; 18:6; 20:12, 13. Possible exceptions are Matt 23:3 where Jesus warns believers not to do “according to the deeds” of the Pharisees and Scribes and 2 Tim 1:9 where Paul explains that Jesus offers salvation not “according to the deeds” we have performed and which cannot earn salvation. Though neither of these two texts refers to the recompense at the end of the age, both hint at it; the warnings against the Pharisees and scribes and their deeds is damnable in the context of Matt 23:3, while had Jesus not offered the gift of salvation our deeds would certainly not have saved us from damnation according to the context of 2 Tim 1:9.

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There is a further reference to destruction and death when Jesus promises to give overcomers “authority over the nations.” The nations will be broken as pieces of clay pots struck by an iron rod (Rev 2:26-27). The motif of nations broken as clay points back to prophetic oracles against the nations in the OT that usually spelt their doom.⁶⁹

The promises to Thyatira also point to a contrast between life and death that we noticed in the other churches. Jesus promises overcomers that He will give them the morning star and power to rule the nations. The promise is primarily eschatological offering believers the right to participate in the triumph of God’s rule over all the earth (Rev 2:26-28).⁷⁰ This means that believers were not to look forward to a time when they would sit down to rule in this present world, but rather looked forward to the world made anew (Rev 20:6; 21:1). They were to hold fast to what they had until Christ would come, so as to share in Christ’s messianic rule. In the Gospels, Jesus promised the disciples that they would one day sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30). The same idea is also attested by Paul (1 Cor 6:2).

The eschatological theme of God’s judgment has the kingdom and its dominion as its climax (Dan 7:14, 26-27; cf. Mat 4:8, 9; Luke 4:5, 6). Thus, the eschatological judgment looks forward to the rightful heirs of the kingdom of God taking their rightful place. The message to Thyatira assures the overcomers authority and rulership over the nations which is the ultimate occupation of the saints with Jesus. Furthermore, though it is rightly understood that of the seven cities of Asia Minor mentioned in Revelation, Thyatira was the least significant, the church here received the longest letter.⁷¹ Furthermore, closely tied to what the book is, a revelation of Jesus (1:1), it is to this church that Jesus plainly reveals Himself as “the Son of God” (2:18). This title which attests to the divinity of Christ is used sixteen times in the NT.⁷²

In regard to the giving of the morning star (Rev 2:28) scholars see two possible things. First, they see it as a promise of resurrection. Just as the

⁶⁹ Bunch, *The Seven Epistles of Christ*, 175; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Barker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 167.

⁷⁰ Wall, *Revelation*, 79.

⁷¹ Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views*, Rev 2:18-29.

⁷² These are Mat 16:16; 26:63; Mark 3:11; Luke 4:41; 22:70; John 1:34, 49; 11:4, 27; 20:31; Acts 9:20; 1 John 3:8; 4:15; 5:5, 20; Rev 2:18.

morning star rises over the darkness of the night, so will the overcomer rise over the darkness of death. Second, they see it as the gift of the risen Christ Himself. Rev 22:16 states: “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am. . . the bright morning star.”⁷³ So, the overcomer will here receive the greatest prize of all, Jesus Christ Himself.⁷⁴ Hence, this points to being with Jesus never to part again throughout eternity. The morning star motif of Rev 22:16 is closely tied to the “water of life” of Rev 22:17. Thus, those who come to Jesus, the morning star, will drink of the water of life and never die again.

Summary and Conclusion

Generations of believers have anticipated the Parousia in their lifetime right from the time of the apostolic age. While the messages to the seven churches of Revelation had firstly been directed to the seven churches in Asia Minor and secondly have been understood to represent seven periods in the history of Christianity, nonetheless, each message has its own diachronic importance for believers of every age. The significance of the judgment language to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 is understood from the perspective of Jesus’ self revelation in chapter 1. This He does by saying; “I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades (Rev 1:17, 18). Thus, depending on whether the churches respond to Him or not, life and death become inevitable respectively.

It has been shown that the effect of the message to the seven churches in terms of the threats or warnings and promises forms a chiasmic structure. Thus, both the first church (Ephesus) and seventh church (Laodicea) are threatened with rejection or separation from Christ who is the source of life. That which is removed from where Christ is and that which Christ Himself spits out experience the same fate, death. Thus, death is pictured as separation from Christ. In terms of promises, both Ephesus and Laodicea are promised immortality and a life with Jesus. This is pictured in terms of eating from the tree of life in paradise, dining with Him, and sitting with Him on His throne. Thus, while the threats were focused on separation from Jesus, the promises are those of being forever with Jesus. This will be

⁷³ Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, 79.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

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possible by eating from the tree of life, thus receiving the gift of immortality.

In like manner, Smyrna as the second church corresponds with the sixth, Philadelphia. Both receive no threats though they are implied in the promises given. While those who remain faithful in Smyrna will not be hurt by the second death, those who hold on to what they have in Philadelphia will be made pillars in God's temple. The second death was shown to mean the cessation of all life rather than everlasting torment. By contrast, those made pillars in God's temple remain with Jesus and dwell with Him eternally.

Similarly, the effect of the message to the third church, Pergamum corresponds to that of Sardis the fifth church. While Christ is seen as coming quickly to Pergamum, to Sardis He comes as a thief. In both, the effects to the unprepared are the same. Furthermore, while Christ threatens to fight those who think they can live without Him, Christ's coming like a thief to Sardis also points to the purpose a thief has for visiting any home. Just as fighting leads to destruction and death, a thief also seeks to destroy and kill. So, in both, death seems to be the ultimate goal.

As regards the promises Pergamum is promised to eat from the hidden manna and to be given a white stone with a new name. These symbolize reception of immortality, exoneration and admission into God's kingdom. Similarly, Sardis will walk in white and the names of the faithful will not be erased from the book of life. The white color of the stone and the white dress both point to the purity that is received from Christ's righteousness. The new name written on a stone, is similar to having one's name maintained and confessed before the Father. At the end of the day, the message is that both are worthy to live with Jesus forever.

Lastly, Thyatira, the fourth church, forms the climax of the eschatological message to the seven churches. This is also signaled by the fact that though it seems least in significance, it receives the longest letter. Other signals are seen on how Jesus chooses to reveal Himself as the Son of God and the openness of His message to them; He searches all, and gives judgment in proportion to works done. Furthermore, in His judgment to Thyatira, He wants all the churches to listen.

In Thyatira, Christ threatens to punish Jezebel and her followers according to their works. Thus because of her adultery, she will be cast on a bed of suffering. The children who are the future of her activities will be killed if they do not repent. In this way Jesus clearly defines what will be

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the fate of those who separate themselves from Him, not only in Thyatira, but also in all the other churches. To the overcomers Jesus promises that they will rule with Him over the nations to the point of destroying them. He also promises the morning star, implying victory over death and the gift of the eternal presence of Jesus.

The repeated references to life and death through a variety of motifs and language throughout the messages to the seven churches paint in stark colors what is at stake in the battle between good and evil and what will be the reward of the righteous and the destiny of the wicked: eternal life for the former, and the total and complete loss of all life for the latter. Nowhere does judgment entail eternal or even temporal torment. The concept simply does not enter the picture.

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