

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

The Letter to Sardis and Eternal Security

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The letter to the church of Sardis has disturbed many Christian readers due to its perceived connotations that one can lose his or her salvation. The promise that Christ will never blot out the name of the one who overcomes from the Book of Life in verse five may terrify the reader with its insinuation that names can be removed. One may easily come to the conclusion that salvation is dependent upon the individual's personal ability to "overcome." A surface reading of the letter can result in sleepless nights, anxious minds, and restless hearts. Is the letter intended to cause fear? Yes and no. It is reasonable to deduce that the letter was meant both to comfort and to exhort its readers. The genuine believers were comforted that their names were never removed from the Book of Life, but there was also a warning for those who may not have assurance as well as for the lost. This paper will provide sufficient evidence to conclude the presence of lost individuals in the church of Sardis. The church of Laodicea is the only other church in the book of Revelation that also seems to include lost people, but this paper will not review that letter. One may argue that Christ did not extend offers of salvation when He addressed the church, but note that He offered salvation repeatedly throughout the letters to the churches. He concluded the letter with an offer of salvation to everyone who reads it (Rev 22:17)! Indeed, Paul advised Christians to make sure they were in the faith. He said to the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you- unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" The exhortation was also applicable to

those who did not have assurance of their salvation due to their lack of faithfulness. The Lord affirmed that grace through faith alone was sufficient for salvation, but genuine faith never remained alone. The scriptural support for the combination of comfort in God's grace, but also exhortation concerning the resulting behavior from and through His grace is overwhelming.

What does God's grace wedded with perseverance look like? It looked like Paul who knew that by the grace of God he was what he was, but that His grace worked mightily through him to accomplish His works (1 Cor 15:10). It looked like Peter urging the church to make their calling and election sure (2 Pet 1:10). Peter assured the believers in 2 Peter 1:3-4 they were granted life and godliness by God's divine power, but verses 5-8 exhorted believers to add to their faith virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love. Paul reminded the church in Colossae of the comfort that they were once separated and hostile to the Lord, but God reconciled them to Himself. He then exhorted them with the reminder that their faith was only genuine if they continued in the faith steadfastly, not shifting from the gospel they heard. The Lord had reconciled the believer, but the believer was expected to display a continued faith in the gospel. Another beautiful picture of faith and faithfulness in action is Philippians 2:12-13. The passage illuminated the mystery of how the grace of God and the responsibility of the saint worked together in harmony. Paul said, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Saints have to work out their salvation, but they should be comforted in knowing that it is the Lord that works

through them in the process. There should be indicators that a person has genuinely believed in Christ. Indeed, James 2:17, 26 asserted that faith without works was “dead.” Revelation 17:14 revealed that those who were with Christ were called and chosen and faithful. The grace of the Lord and the responsibility of the Christian are in view since those who are called and chosen prove it by their faithfulness. Paige Patterson asserts that in every stage of human history the two vital aspects of following Christ are faith and endurance. The Christian’s faith is in the Lord’s purposes and promises, which makes endurance possible. “Endurance, on the other hand, is the sure, visible outworking of the inner faith that provides the impetus for obedience to God even under intractable circumstances.”¹ It is essential not to confuse righteous deeds as a contributing factor to a sinner’s salvation. The righteous acts proceed as a result from the grace of God. Faith is all that is necessary for salvation, but genuine faith in Christ never remains alone.

In light of this scriptural theme that grace and perseverance are wedded, Revelation 3:5 should both comfort the believer that salvation cannot be lost, but also exhort him or her to ensure they are in the faith. The goal for this paper is to unveil how the letter to Sardis pertains to eternal security by analyzing the context of the letter, what John meant by “the one who overcomes,” “the Book of Life,” and by conducting an exegetical study of the passage. Each section of the paper aside from the context illustrates that the grace of God is visibly demonstrated through the actions of genuine believers. The letter contains comfort for genuine believers, but also a warning to the lost and those without assurance of salvation.

Previous Studies on the Topic

¹ Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2012), 279.

William Fuller admits that Revelation 3:5 can cause anxiety about the hope of eternal security in his article from the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* titled, "I will not erase his name from the book of life" (Revelation 3:5).² Concerning Revelation 3:5, Fuller cites Walvoord's two possibilities about what the text signifies. The first possibility is that the text may be an example of an affirmative expressed by the negative of its contrary. He views this possibility as unlikely. The second possibility is that the Lord wrote the name of every individual before his or her birth, but if the person rejects Christ the name is blotted out. Fuller rejects this second possibility since Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 reveals that the names were written from the foundation of the world. He states that the names are permanently present or absent according to these verses. In order to argue for his position that the text does not indicate the loss of eternal security for the believer his article focuses on three phrases: "the one who overcomes," "the Book of Life," and "the name."

Fuller acknowledges the tension of the potential loss of salvation that believers experience when they read about the overcomers in the book of Revelation. He defines the overcomer as one who wins the fight against the spiritual threat for him and his church. He endures until the end against the threats of persecution and the denial of the faith even if it means martyrdom, physical death, or the return of Jesus. He does not believe that all Christians are overcomers since giving a command that everyone will obey seems unnecessary. He says that the promises made to those who overcome are essentially a close relationship with Christ in heaven.

² Fuller, J William, "I Will Not Erase His Name from the Book of Life' (Revelation 3:5)," *Journal Of The Evangelical Theological Society* 26, no. 3 (September 1983): 297-306, accessed October 13, 2015, http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/26/26-3/26-3-pp297-306_JETS.pdf.

He then shifts his attention to the Book of Life. The Book of Life was a list of the members in a community in the Ancient Near East. He says that to be blotted out signified physical death (Deut 29:20). According to the Old Testament to be erased removed the memory of the person (Exod 17:4). The righteous, however, had their deeds recorded in a Book of Remembrance according to Malachi 3:16. Fuller proposes that the Book of Life in the New Testament is entirely spiritual. It contains the names of the elect from eternity past and their deeds that the Lord will reward. He proposes that there is a distinction between the righteous and the wicked in every passage in Revelation concerning the Book of Life except Revelation 3:5, which indicates that having one's name in the book is the important element.

The final focus of his article was the study of how "name" (*onoma*) is used in the passage. A "name" in Hebrew thought meant an extension of one's self. He cites Proverbs 22:1 in support, which says, "A good name is to be desired above great riches." This verse signifies that "name" implies one's reputation. Fuller points to the use of "name" in Revelation 2:17 and says that it signifies spiritual reputation in God's eyes. He cites several verses in Revelation that use "name" to refer to the nature or character of something instead of a name of a person. He concludes that the heavenly reputation of the believers of Sardis was at stake. Believers will enter eternal life, but if they do not overcome, then the name, or title they could have had will be lost. Therefore, the motivation to overcome was to have a unique and honorable relationship with God. Fuller notes that his proposal removes the possibility of losing one's salvation. The use of "name" in 3:5 is essentially about reputation.

Another previous work on this topic is an article by Charles R. Smith. He wrote about this topic in his *Grace Theological Journal* article called *The Book of Life*.³ Smith tackles questions concerning the Book of Life including if there is more than one Book of Life, whose names are written in the book, when names were written in it, and if names can be blotted out.

The first issue Smith attempts to tackle is the number of Books of Life. He asserts that there are two. Smith argues that to be blotted out of the Book of Life in the Old Testament meant forfeiting all covenant blessings associated with the covenant people of God. One of the blessings included long life, which is cut short with disobedience. He notices a progressive revelation concerning the Book of Life that includes a shift takes place from the Old to the New Testament. The emphasis on physical and temporal blessing is transformed into eternal and spiritual blessings with the first hint of this change in Daniel 12:1. Smith proposes the possibility of two separate books: one of conditional and temporal covenantal blessing in the Old Testament, and one of eternal unconditional blessing in the New Testament.

The next question Smith addresses is the people who are written in the Book of Life. He argues that the four possibilities for those in the Book of Life are: “(1) all humans, (2) all professing believers, (3) all believers, including those who will fall away unto damnation, and (4) all of the elect.”⁴ The first, second, and third, option lacks scriptural support based on Christ’s and Paul’s use of the term. Jesus said to the disciples to rejoice because their names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20). In addition, Paul

³ Charles R. Smith, "The Book of Life," *Grace Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (September 1985): 219-230, accessed November 25, 2015, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/gtj/06-2_219.pdf.

⁴ Smith, "The Book of Life," 225.

comforted the Philippian church in the midst of an argument by stating that their names were in the Book of Life (Phil 4:3). There is no distinction if everyone has his or her name written in heaven, which would make these encouragements meaningless. Also, Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 specifically mentions people on earth whose names are not written in the Book of Life. Therefore, the fourth possibility has the most credibility. One's eternal destiny swings on the presence or absence of his or her name in the Book of Life (Rev 20:15; 21:27).

The third question Smith discusses concerns when the names were written. The three most popular theories of the point in time when a believer has his or her name written in the Book of Life is at birth, at the conversion, and from the foundation of the world. Smith does not locate any biblical support for the writing of one's name at conversion or birth. He argues that Revelation 17:8 make it necessary for the names to be written before creation.

Finally, Smith refutes the possibility for a name to be blotted out of the Book of Life. He argues that those who believe names can be blotted maintain that the Book of Life is the same in the Old and New Testament, all professing believers have their names in the Book of Life until the unsaved are blotted out, the blotting out occurs at the Judgment Seat of Christ, true believers can lose their salvation based on conditional election, or Revelation 3:5 and/or 22:19 prove that one can have their name blotted out. The first two options he shows to be unsupported, and the third option is refuted by Rev 20:14-15, which proves that to have one's name not found in the Book of Life results in the lake of fire for that individual. Smith refutes the fourth option of conditional election by stating that the apostates who never had their names written in the Book of Life cannot

have their names blotted out of it.⁵ God foreknows the people who will endure and does not write the names of individuals who fall away. The final reason why some believe Christians can have their names blotted out and lose their salvation is based on the interpretation of Revelation 3:5; 22:19. Revelation 22:19 should be translated “Tree of Life.” Only the KJV made the mistake of translating the phrase as “Book of Life.” The “Tree of Life” symbolizes eternal life in the Bible, which those who add or take away from the prophecy will not obtain. The important verse to interpret then is Revelation 3:5. Smith asserts that John has already defined “overcomers” as all true believers in his other books. In addition, believers do not have to face the second death, which Revelation 2:11 promises to those who overcome. All believers, therefore, must be overcomers who have their names in the Book of Life.

These previous studies underscore the numerous interpretations concerning the content of the letter to Sardis. I agree with Fuller and Smith that concerning the Book of Life there is a progression of revelation concerning the physical and temporal blessings of the Old Testament to spiritual and eternal blessings in the New Testament, but I do not agree with Smith that the Old and New Testament have separate books of life. Scriptural evidence is lacking to support his claim. The progressive revelation, however, can help explain why there appears to be names that are blotted out during the Old Testament era, but possibly no indication of names blotted out during the New Testament. Perhaps

⁵ There are scholars who agree with the conditional predestination view. They argue that every person has their name in the Book of Life and has an opportunity for salvation, but most reject Christ and have their names blotted out. These scholars include G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 49; Douglas K Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 688; Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 72. Mitchell Reddish posits that believers can lose their salvation based on the letter to Sardis. He unapologetically argues that those who are not faithful will have their names expunged from the Book of Life and will lose their place in God’s fellowship. Mitchell Glenn Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub, 2001), 72.

removal from the Book of Life can result from the discipline of the Lord that leads to physical death. The Old Testament seems to support this notion. Smith supports the position that all believers are overcomers while Fuller contends against this notion. This paper will seek to confirm and strengthen the argument that all true believers are overcomers. In addition, evidence will be given to reasonably conclude that all Christians who have their names in the Book of Life will show evidence that their names are written in it.

Method

The method for this paper will be a study of existing, relevant, and numerous peer reviewed articles and scholarly books to identify the implications for eternal security in light of Revelation 3:5. In addition, important lexical terms will be defined by theological dictionaries to clarify this study. This paper will also pay careful attention to the Greek for a thorough understanding of the text. The author of this paper has learned the Greek language and will utilize critical commentaries, which analyze the use of the original language for the text. The strategy will be to utilize scholarly journals and books with the analysis from the author of this paper for every section including the historical context of Sardis, a word study for “overcomer” and “Book of Life,” and an exegetical analysis of Revelation 3:1-6.

Chapter 2

Context of Revelation Three

There are five important facts that can be gleaned from studying the context of the letter to the church of Sardis. The first is the structure of the letter and the location of verse five in this structure. The second important fact is the wealth and location of Sardis. The third is the history of surprise attacks. The fourth is the perceived ability of the city's pagan god. The final important fact is the long-standing Jewish presence in Sardis.

The structure of the letter to the church of Sardis is important to acknowledge. The letters to the churches in the book of Revelation have a general format which includes a greeting, descriptive title for Jesus, review of the life and accommodations of the church, rebukes with warnings and instructions, final exhortations, and promises. The potentially frightening verse five is located in the promise section of the letter. Therefore, the church was supposed to be comforted by Christ's statement that He was not going to blot out the names of those who overcome. Also, the church of Sardis did not receive the general inclusion of accommodation, which stressed the severity of their spiritual condition. He merely indicated that there were a few believers who were worthy.

The wealth and location of Sardis are also important because they may reveal possible explanations for why the church became dead over time. It may be labeled the proverbial city on a hill with its fortified land that many believed was impenetrable because of its location on top of a mountain.¹² The city was located on the south side of the Hermus River about thirty miles southeast of Thyatira with the acropolis of the city

¹² Blount, *Revelation*, 66.

on a spur of Mount Tmolus. The earliest the city could have been established was 1400 B.C. since it was before the Trojan War.¹³ The city of Sardis had a remarkable history. It was one of the most popular cities of the ancient near east approximately six centuries before John wrote the book of Revelation.¹⁴ Sardis was once the capital of the Lydian Empire during the sixth and seventh centuries B.C. The past glory of the city had faded, but it was still prosperous during the time of John's letter. The city was famous for its wealth of gold contained in the stream of Pactolus. The existence of gold dust in the stream of Pactolus running through the land is well documented.¹⁵ Rumors spread that the mythical Midas of Phrygia with his golden touch had bathed in the river, which explained the existence of gold in the water.¹⁶ Many proverbial literary pieces were written concerning the golden sands in this stream.¹⁷ In addition, the city had a strategic location that aided in its abundant wealth because major roads intersected through it that enabled commerce.¹⁸ The western terminus of the Royal Road connects Sardis with the Persian capitals of Susa and Persepolis which results in healthy trade.¹⁹ The city boasted of more than its strategic location and abundance of gold, but it was also a producer of textile, and produced the most common outer garment worn by Greco-Roman citizens. Obviously

¹³ Mark W. Wilson, *Biblical Turkey: A Guide to the Jewish and Christian Sites of Asia Minor* (Istanbul, Turkey: Ege Yayınları, 2010), 298.

¹⁴ Ranko Stefanović, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002), 137.

¹⁵ Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 131.

¹⁶ Patterson, *Revelation*, 119.

¹⁷ Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, 131.

¹⁸ Reddish, *Revelation*, 69.

¹⁹ Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, 299.

they had plenty of reasons to exhibit pride due to their wealth and past glory, which may have led to their dead spiritual condition. The second illuminating fact about the city may explain the choice of words the Lord used in the letter.

Interestingly, the third fact about Sardis is that it had an unfortunate history of surprise attacks.²⁰ The warning that Christ may return like a thief struck a chord with the citizens of Sardis because of their two historical experiences in which they were overtaken by negligent protectors. The Persian King Cyrus in 549 B.C. and the Seleucid King Antiochus III in 195 B.C. both took advantage of the unguarded locations of the city because of overconfidence of the city's protectors.²¹ The words of Christ had extra sting for the people of Sardis because they had a history of pride and laziness in their watchfulness.²² In addition, the city was previously traumatized by an unwelcomed guest in the form of a natural disaster. A massive earthquake had come upon the city suddenly as in AD 17. It received the most damage of any city according to Pliny and Tacitus, reducing its size about thirty-three percent by the time John wrote the letter to them.²³ In light of both military and natural calamities in their past, the city was painfully acquainted with sudden destruction.

The fourth fact about Sardis worth noting is the presence of their pagan goddess who apparently had the ability to grant life. The believers in Sardis may have succumbed to the mistaken belief that their city's pagan goddess granted life. "The patron

²⁰ R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John: With Introduction, Notes, and Indices, Also the Greek Text and English Translation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), 77.

²¹ Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, 66.

²² Reddish, *Revelation*, 72.

²³ Patterson, *Revelation*, 120-121.

deity of the city was the goddess Cybele whose temple hosted eunuch priests. According to Robert H. Mounce, this goddess (equating to the Greek Artemis) ‘was believed to possess the special power of restoring the dead to life.’”²⁴ The Lord seemed to touch on both the false belief that the city’s god restored life and the perception of life in the church when He told them they were dead.

Finally, the city of Sardis had a long-standing Jewish community before the book of Revelation was written. The Jews had taken up residency in Sardis long before the letter was written.²⁵ Wilson notes, “The largest ancient synagogue of the Jewish Diaspora was discovered at Sardis.”²⁶ The name of the synagogue was Beth Alpha, and it was built in several stages throughout the seventh to the third century B.C.²⁷ There is also a verse in one of the Minor Prophets that may strengthen the evidence for Jewish population in the region. Many interpret the exiled location for the Jews in Sepharad in Obadiah twenty as Sardis.²⁸ Since the exile occurred in the sixth century BC the Jews were probably living in the city since that time. In addition, the location and features of the synagogue reveal the prominent Jewish influence in the city. Wilson further adds to the evidence of a prominent Jewish population in Sardis when he says, “Although the synagogue dates from the 4C AD, its site was originally developed two centuries earlier, and three earlier structures were found beneath. The synagogue’s remarkable size and central location as

²⁴ Stefanović, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 138.

²⁵ Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, 300.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 306.

²⁷ David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary 52a (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1997), 218.

²⁸ Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, 309.

part of the bath and gymnasium complex indicates the wealth and strength of the city's long-standing Jewish community."²⁹ Further confirmation is given for the residency of the Jews in Sardis from a letter from Julius Caesar. In the first century BC, Julius Caesar sent a letter to the Jews living in Sardis to affirm their rights to keep their native laws.³⁰ In addition, the remains of the synagogue in the city have revealed a Jewish membership. There were inscriptions that identified about eighty Jews from the synagogue as Greek citizens with Greek names.³¹ The discovery of this synagogue proves a much wealthier and powerful Jewish community in the city than once thought. This fact will be important in understanding the pressure that the Christians in Sardis faced by the Jewish population.³² Now that the background of Sardis is reviewed it will be helpful to understand what John meant by the "one who overcomes."

²⁹ Ibid., 306.

³⁰ Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, 309.

³¹ Ibid., 306.

³² Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary: Revelation 1-5*, 219.

Chapter 3

Word Study for “Overcomer”

To better comprehend the letter to Sardis it is important to grasp what John meant by “overcome.” The term is used by John twenty-four of the twenty-eight uses in the New Testament.³³ The first seven uses of “overcomer” in the book of Revelation are in reference to the people in the seven churches to whom the letters are addressed. Concluding each letter is an exhortation from the Lord Himself to “overcome.” The word has at least fifteen occurrences in the book of Revelation. What does “overcoming” mean? What are the ramifications if one overcomes or fails to overcome? This paper will give evidence that presents a reasonable conclusion that all genuine believers are overcomers, genuine believers demonstrate they are overcomers through their faith and their faithfulness, and all of the promises to those who overcome point to the one glorious promise that believers will step into an eternity of God’s presence. Before giving evidence of these assertions it is necessary to view a theological dictionary’s definition of overcoming.

Bakers Dictionary of Theology defines the term overcoming as follows: “The Christian idea of overcoming has its basis in the declaration of Jesus that he had overcome the world (John 16:33). The word “world” in this context is to be understood to denote all in the world which is antagonistic to the will of God.”³⁴ Fortunately for the

³³ Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Texas: Word Books, 1984), 75.

³⁴ Donald Guthrie, “Overcome,” in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, Harrison Everett Falconer, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1960), 390.

Christian, one stronger than the world has come and disarmed these antagonistic forces (Luke 11:22). *Baker's Dictionary* then proceeds to describe the overcomers in 1 John to have victory over the wicked one (2:13, 14), those with the antichrist spirit (4:4), and the world (5:4, 5). The genuineness of the overcomer is demonstrated through his or her attitude toward Jesus, which reveals the interdependency of moral victory and correct doctrine.³⁵ The Dictionary states that the book of Revelation reveals the overcomers as those who endure tribulations and maintain their faith in the midst of false teaching (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). Christ is presented as the One who was slain, yet overcame. He alone is worthy to open the scroll (5:5), and He will finally overcome all his enemies (17:14). Jesus and the saints' ability to overcome are juxtaposed with the temporary power given to the Beast to overcome (13:7).³⁶ The dictionary affirms that the promises of the future are reserved only for those who overcome (21:7). Who will overcome?

All Genuine Believers are Overcomers

All genuine believers are overcomers. Earlier Johannine literature in the book of John and 1 John unanimously support the argument that all believers are overcomers. There is sufficient evidence to believe that the overcomer in 1 John is the regenerate Christian. The assertion in 1 John 3:10 delineates that there are only two types of people in this world: those who are children of God, and those who are the children of the devil. The children of God will practice righteousness by obeying God. The command of God is described in 1 John 3:23. "And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment." The

³⁵ Harrison, "Baker's Dictionary of Theology," 390.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 390.

unrighteous do not have regenerate hearts, which their disobedient lives affirm. In 1 John 4:4, John reminds the believers that they are victors because they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. They are not victorious because they are wiser or more skilled than the false prophets, but because God is in them. God has enabled them to resist, or overcome, the teachings of the false prophets.³⁷ “The victory they have (*nenikēkate*, perfect tense) is a past victory that continues into the present.”³⁸ Smalley agrees that since the verb is in the perfect tense it means not only a decisive victory already accomplished, but also a continuing victory over false teaching.³⁹ The assurance in 1 John 5:4-5 is that every Christian is an overcomer because they are regenerated by faith. Akin says, “...everyone who has been born of God is able to keep God’s commands because he has been given power by God to overcome the negative influences that would prevent such obedience.”⁴⁰ Only through the power of the Holy Spirit are Christians capable of pleasing God by resisting the temptations to fall into sinful practices. An unregenerate person may avoid committing a sin, but the motivation will never be to please the Lord. Anything not from faith is sin (Rom 14:23). “The new birth gives Christians the opportunity to overcome the supernatural powers of the earth that they carnally have no chance overcoming. As Jesus stated that He had overcome the world in John’s Gospel (16:33b), here believers are said to overcome the world as well.”⁴¹ The comfort that Christians can take to heart from First

³⁷ Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 173.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

³⁹ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 226.

⁴⁰ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 192.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

John is that in Christ every disciple shares His victory over the evil one (2:3-14), the Antichrists of this world (4:4), and the world itself (5:4-5).⁴²

The only use of “overcome” in the book of John is found in John 16:33. Jesus comforted the disciples by telling them that He had “overcome” the world, and the suffering and tribulation that was imminently coming should not cause them to worry or doubt. Christ knew that because of His success that His disciples could be assured of victory. “The use of the perfect *nenikēka* was obviously intended by John to communicate a proleptic sense of victory even before the crucifixion.”⁴³ The perfect tense denoted an abiding victory of Christ, which He guaranteed to His disciples despite their shortcomings.⁴⁴ He does not tell them to have courage because they were able to overcome the world, but because He has overcome. The good news is that He won the battle for the saints and if they abide in Him they enjoy His victory.⁴⁵ Jesus has already promised the disciples His joy, and in this verse He also promised them His peace in light of His overcoming the world. “Peace and joy are two primary realities of the saving sovereignty that Jesus brings, and they are gifts of the present- even in tribulation!”⁴⁶ It is helpful to remember the earlier Johannine usage of “overcome” as the uses in Revelation are now placed under the microscope.

⁴² George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 288.

⁴³ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 184.

⁴⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 633.

⁴⁵ Gary M. Burge, *John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 456.

⁴⁶ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 288.

Revelation 2:11 is one of the clearest indications that those who overcome will include all Christians because the Lord promises that those who overcome will not be harmed by the second death. The second death involves the casting of all lost people into the lake of fire (Rev 20:15). Revelation 21:8 describes the liars, murderers, idolaters, fearful, unbelieving, and abominable people who will have their part in the lake of fire that burns with fire and brimstone. Christ had already guaranteed that no Christians will be hurt by the second death, but will live forever with Him (John 14:2; Rom 6:23; 1 Thess 4:17).⁴⁷ Avoiding the deserved penalty of the lake of fire is one of the merciful guarantees for genuine believers.

Revelation 5:5 vividly portrays Christ as the overcomer and that He alone is worthy to open the scroll and loose the seven seals. He is the ultimate victor both in Revelation and every book of the Bible. “The basis and hope of the repeated exhortation to the churches to ‘overcome’ in chs. 2-3 is the fact that the Lamb has already ‘overcome’ the malevolent forces that threaten the church.”⁴⁸ If Christ had not conquered the world, the flesh, and the devil then John had every right to continue weeping because nobody would have the authority to bring redemption and judgment to the world. Thankfully, however, the Lamb of God is worthy to open the scroll because He had “overcome,” redeemed a people for Himself, and will judge righteously.

Revelation 21:7-8 reveals the distinction between the righteous and the wicked. Those who overcome are the righteous who will enjoy eternal life with the Lord, but those who do not overcome are in the category of the wicked that will be condemned to the second death in the lake of fire. These promises are intended to involve all true

⁴⁸ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 350.

believers, which means that those who fail to be overcome also fail to indicate they are genuine followers of Christ.⁴⁹ Their lot is the lake of fire.

Finally, it is worth noting the *hapax legomenon* of “superovercome,” *υπερνικωμεν*, found in Romans 8:37. It means Christians are “more than conquerors” or have “overwhelming victory” because of Christ who loves them.⁵⁰ The reason why Christians are more than conquerors is directly related to the One who loves them, Jesus Christ. Without Him they are not conquerors of anything. Paul may have chosen this rare intensive form of the verb to emphasize that Christians not only conquer, but they more than conquer because God uses all circumstances for their own good.⁵¹ Christians conquer with success to spare because of the power of God, not themselves. He holds onto them no matter what the world or the devil throw at them. Nothing and no one can separate Christians from His love, and obstacles along the way make the Christian grow in his or her maturity and relationship with Him.⁵²

Genuine Believers Demonstrate they are Overcomers through their Faith and their Faithfulness

Genuine believers demonstrate they are overcomers through their faith and their faithfulness. *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* reminds the reader that those who overcome endure tribulations and maintain their faith in the midst of false teaching. Well, the church of Thyatira had a major problem with false teaching. Christ says that those who

⁴⁹ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 272.

⁵⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans. 1-8* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 506.

⁵¹ Douglas J. Moo, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 284.

⁵² John MacArthur. *Romans 1-8*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 514.

overcome are the believers who repent of the prophetess Jezebel's works and those who never participated in them. He tells the church in Revelation 2:26 that those who overcome and keep His works until the end will be given authority over the nations. Notice how Christ said, "until the end." Their perseverance until the end will prove that they will receive the promise to reign in His kingdom.⁵³ Overcoming seems to indicate a continual characteristic of the Christian. "The substantive participle, ὁ νικῶν ('the one who overcomes') in context conveys a continuing characteristic of the genuine believer."⁵⁴ Revelation 2:26 may contain an important description of what overcoming entails since it includes an explanation in the verse. The phrase "the one who overcomes" is followed with the use of "the one who keeps" in this passage. "The similar participial construction ὁ τηρῶν ('the one who keeps') in 2:26 conveys the same sense and is significant as the only instance in the letters where ὁ νικῶν is immediately explained by a parallel phrase. It shows that overcoming is to be understood primarily as persevering in faith and good works."⁵⁵ The faith of genuine believers is demonstrated through their faithfulness. In this case, Christ expected the church execute church discipline on the prophetess. Other excellent examples of the grace of faith along with the evidence of faithfulness is found in Revelation 17:14 and 15:2.

Revelation 17:14 states, "These will make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings; and those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful." The Lamb will overcome the ten kings of the earth

⁵³ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 266.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁵⁵ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 271.

that give their power to the beast. This verse clearly illuminates the secret of what it means to overcome. Jesus Christ is the one and only person who overcame sin and death. The true children of God will prove to belong to Him because of their faithfulness. Indeed, His children are called, chosen, and faithful according to this verse. Revelation 15:2 also testifies to the faithfulness of the overcomers. The verse reveals that the saints in heaven who had overcome the beast and his image, number, and mark will sing with the harps of God. The saints had resisted the demands of the Antichrist and his system of government. They had overcome under the pressure of the tribulation to turn from the authority of God to the authority of the Antichrist. The overcomers are those who refused to adhere to the demands of the beast to take his mark, number, and name. They refused to abandon the faith by submitting to his requests.⁵⁶ Their faithfulness in overcoming led to songs of praise for the Lord. The most well-known and significant example in the book of Revelation that genuine believers demonstrate they are overcomers through their faith and their faithfulness is in Revelation 12:11.

Revelation 12:11 delineates that the saints overcome Satan by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not love their lives even when faced with death. The only possibility to overcome is by the power of the gospel of Christ, and one must accept His message and submit to Him as Lord in order to overcome. The suffering of Christians is not an indicator of the triumph of Satan, but of the victory of the saints over Satan because of their faith in Christ's victory on the cross.⁵⁷ The suffering of believers can be held in light of the suffering of Christ that

⁵⁶ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 286.

⁵⁷ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 663.

ensured ultimate victory. Homcy believes that Revelation 12:11 is the key verse to understand the use of “overcome” in Revelation.⁵⁸ It is the blood of the Lamb that overcomes sin, death, and the devil, but only those who put their trust in Christ will receive the power to overcome. The supposed defeat of the two witnesses can help clarify how believers overcome. The two witnesses were killed after their testimony, and were then raised to life. (Rev 11:7) Believers may seem to be defeated, but they are triumphant when they keep the faith and place their lives in God’s hands. Finally, all believers can anticipate a glorious future in the Lord’s presence.

All of the Promises to those who Overcome Involve Blessings that Pertain to
Eternal Life with the Lord

All of the promises to those who overcome involve blessings that pertain to eternal life with the Lord. Beale notes that the promises to the churches in Revelation as including security, a home, power, food, clothing, and a name.⁵⁹ These are the kind of blessings that all believers will enjoy forever in eternity. Brent D. Sandy presents a compelling argument that the letters to the seven churches contain one unified and rich promise to the overcomers. One of the problems with attempting to explain the meaning of each promise as if it is unique from the others is that it can lead down one of a multiplicity of roads in interpretation. One of the examples of these issues is the promise given to the overcomers in Pergamum of the hidden manna and white stone with a name on it that only the one who receives it knows (Rev 2:17). There are at least twelve

⁵⁸ Stephen L. Homcy, "To Him Who Overcomes': A Fresh Look at What 'Victory' Means for the Believer According to the Book of Revelation," *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society* 38, no. 2 (June 1995): 193-201, accessed November 7, 2015, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6smVijz2aFdREtvd3IIdXVJT0U/view>.

⁵⁹ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 271.

interpretations for this promise! Yeatts provides seven possibilities for its meaning.⁶⁰ The first possibility is that it related to the law court where jurors presented white stones for acquittal and black stones for condemnation. The second option related to ancient theatre where flat stones were used for admission, which may have alluded to the necessity for admission into the kingdom. The third possibility is that the stone represented the stones in Aaron's priestly robe. The depiction of manna and a stone points to this interpretation and shows the overcomer has direct access to the Lord. The fourth option is that the stones were used as charms with magical powers. The connotation is that the one who overcomes has power from the Lord. The fifth possibility is the relation of colored stones used for calculations in ancient times. The overcomers were counted with those who were of the Lord according to this interpretation. The sixth option is related to the fact that stones were used as tickets for the poor. The poor gave stones for food, which correlates with the Lord providing for those who overcome. The last option according to Yeatts is that white stones were used to indicate good days, which may represent the Lord blessing overcomers on the Day of the Lord. There are many possible interpretations, but perhaps the promises to overcomers are unified with one general meaning. The name given to the believer that only the believer and the Lord know intimates a personal relationship between the two. Perhaps Christians are meant to marvel over the awesome future that the Lord describes for all believers. His promises for those who overcome grant a sneak preview of heaven that believers can cherish rather than argue about what each individual promise may indicate. Sandy writes, "...perhaps rather than disassembling each reward piece by piece to determine its significance, we should keep them whole and look at their

⁶⁰ John R. Yeatts, *Revelation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 66.

referent collectively rather than individually.”⁶¹ Sandy is describing a common goal of prophetic language. Indeed, the study of prophetic language has indicated that a number of images may refer to the same object. Sandy maintains that the promises to the overcomers indicate eternal life in the presence of the Lord. This overarching promise is beautifully constructed with symbolic imagery throughout the seven letters.

Here are some examples of how the promises point to the one hope of dwelling with the Lord. The rewards for the overcomers include the Tree of Life (2:7) and manna from heaven (2:17). Both of these represent unique closeness to the Lord that Adam, Eve, and the Israelites experienced. Aune describes the promises for the overcomers in 2:7 as God’s restoration for his original intent for mankind. Eating from the tree of life is promised to those who overcome in Ephesus as well. God is restoring His divine presence among humanity, which seems to include eating from the tree of life. Indeed, creation itself waits for the Lord to set it free from its current bondage (Rom 8:21). The tree of life will be in the eternal city that Christ will establish according to Revelation 22:2. Entering the city is equated with having the right to the tree of life (Rev 22:14). Ezekiel uses the same imagery when referring to the eschatological kingdom in Ezekiel 47. Overcoming sin grants the presence of Christ now, but the full eradication of sin will allow believers to experience the presence of God as it was before the fall and to a greater degree in eternity.⁶²

Another example that all of the promises to those who overcome involve blessings that pertain to eternal life with the Lord is found in Revelation 3:12. To be a

⁶¹ D. Brent. Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2013, 30.

⁶² Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 235.

pillar in the temple of God is to be in His presence for all eternity.⁶³ In addition, the promise to not be hurt by the second death (2:11) suggests life with God. Believers have the assurance that they will forever dwell with the Lord instead of the Lake of Fire. Finally, the promise that overcomers will be given authority over the nations (2:26-27) was previously promised by Jesus in the parable of the ten minas (Luke 19:11-27). The number of nations He granted a believer to rule differed according to their work based on Luke 19, but ruling was granted to believers nonetheless. The Lord continues the promised blessings in 2:28 when He tells them He will give the overcomer the morning star. This bright hope also insinuates eternal life with the Lord. “This promise seems to reflect Numbers 24:17, which prophesied that a star would arise in Israel, and Luke 1:78, which describes the coming of Jesus in terms of the ‘sunrise.’”⁶⁴ It should not be entirely surprising that the promises involve all believers since John said that blessed are those who read the entirety of the prophecy (Rev 1:3).

In addition, he said in each of the letters, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the *churches*” (Emphasis mine). The promises in Revelation are meant not only for the saints in the first century, but for all saints. All believers (overcomers) can anticipate with exhilaration the promise of beholding the living God of eternity. The final glimpse of the reward for overcomers is given in Revelation 21:7 after the Lord creates the new heaven and new earth: “He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.” It is a fitting summary of the reward for overcomers,

⁶³ Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks*, 31.

⁶⁴ James M. Hamilton, *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 101.

which is to experience God's presence in all its fullness.⁶⁵ It is deity and humanity dwelling together in perfect unity. These promises are meant to enable the reader to experience the glory of God's presence.

Why did the churches and why do believers still need these promises for those who overcome? Jesus intends to encourage His church in the midst of difficult circumstances. The churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia were under persecution, and were encouraged to remain faithful in the face of the temptation to relinquish their faith under the impending threat of death. The other five churches were not facing imminent persecution, but they were facing temptations in various kinds.⁶⁶ The present participle for overcome (*nikaō*) was used throughout chapters two and three, which stressed the importance of ongoing victory against the threats to compromise.⁶⁷ There are multiple varieties of threats that Christians encounter, but all true believers can be encouraged that they will overcome them and eagerly anticipate eternal life in God's presence.

The summary of John's use of overcome is this: the grace of God is manifest through Christ on behalf of all believers to enable them to have victory in the midst of hardship and false teaching through their faith in Him, which is inevitably demonstrated through their behavior in light of the anticipation of the glorious future with Christ in eternity. With this understanding concerning the overcomers, it is important to understand what John meant by the Book of Life and how it can pertain to eternal security.

⁶⁵ Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks*, 30.

⁶⁶ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 269.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Chapter 4

Word Study for “Book of Life”

What is the Book of Life? According to *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, the image of a book implies a roster of names (Neh 7:5, 64) that become members of God’s family and share in His life through grace and obedience. Those who are erased from this book are sentenced to death.⁶⁸ The Book of Life also seems to be used by the Lord to prepare for the final accounting (Mal 3:16-18; Rev 20:12-14). The final function of the Book of Life is to keep the plans of God for His people both individually and communally. (Ps 56:8; 139:16).⁶⁹ The depiction of the Book of Life is probably figurative. The Lord’s omniscience does not require a book containing records that He may forget. It is important to remember that the infinite is communicating with the finite, which requires the use of figurative language at times.

Having a physical list of residents was common for the Israelites. “In ancient cities the name of citizens were recorded in a register until their death; then their names were marked out of the book of the living. This same idea appears in the OT (Exod. 32:32-33; Ps 69:28; Is 4:3).”⁷⁰ There are several references in the Old Testament of Israelites recording the names of its individuals. One of these references include the census lists in Numbers, 1 Chronicles 5:17; 7:5, Ezra 2:62, and Nehemiah 7:5. The book of 1 Chronicles depicted how the Israelites recorded genealogies of their families while

⁶⁸ Paul S. Minear, “Book of Life,” *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Bruce Manning Metzger and Michael David Coogan, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 93.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ A.F. Johnson, “Book of Life,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 184.

the local officials also kept records. In addition, there are passages that indicate Jewish families normally maintained family registers (Neh 7:5; 1 Chron 7:5). Local officials also kept records (1 Chron 5:17; 9:22).⁷¹ Common to ancient civilization, the Israelites kept a physical list of its citizens, but the Book of Life appears to have three separate categories concerning the names in it.

The Book of Life appears to have three scriptural categories concerning the existence of names: names of believers that have their names permanently inscribed, the names of those who have their names blotted out of the Book of Life, and people who have never had their names in the Book of Life. R. C. H. Lenski attempts to summarize the appearance of names in the Book of Life. He says, “To have one’s name inscribed implies divine certification of a position and of corresponding rights with the Lord. To have one’s name erased is to lose both, and never to have it inscribed is never to have them.”⁷² This paper will not attempt to explain how these categories can exist simultaneously in harmony. It will certainly not be the only biblical truth that involves tension. It appears that all of the people in these categories demonstrate evidence that they belong in their category. Interestingly, names may be removed from the Book of Life according to the witness of Scripture, but this fact does not indicate that genuine believers in Christ lose their salvation. This paper will examine the three categories that the Book of Life appears to present concerning the existence of names.

Names that are Permanently Inscribed

⁷¹ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 83.

⁷² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress), 2008.

The first category of names included in the Book of Life is names that are permanently inscribed. The prophet Daniel prophesied about a future eschatological event that will involve worse tribulation than the world has known. Daniel 12:1 says, “At that time Michael shall stand up, the great prince who stands watch over the sons of your people; and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time. And at that time your people will be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book.” The prophet indicates that the saints who have their names in the Book of Life do not need to fear the troubles that will overtake the world. The verse reveals that those whose names are written in the Book of Life belong to God’s people and are included in the registry of the true Jerusalem.⁷³ This is a promise for people in the future, which can imply that their names have always been in the Lord’s book. The element of proof that the saints belong in the category of those in the Book of Life is that they are wise and lead many to righteousness (Dan 12:3). Another possible reference to those who have their names permanently inscribed in the Book of Life is Luke 10:20.

The first reference to the Book of Life in the New Testament emphatically states the spiritual significance of having one’s name in the book. Jesus tells the disciples not to rejoice because demons are subjected to them, but to rejoice because their names are written in heaven. Luke 10:20 says, “Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.” Bock emphasizes the continuous joy that results from knowing that one’s name is in the Book of Life by highlighting what Jesus said to His disciples after they had cast out many

⁷³Alphonso Groenewald, "The 'Book of Life' (Psalm 69:29): a Question of Life or Death?" *Verbum Et Ecclesia* 24, (2003): 99, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://verbumeteclesia.org.za/index.php/VE/article/view/313/250>.

demons. Bock asserts, “The submission of evil spirits to them is nothing compared to the fact that they are registered among the saved in the Book of Life. Here is the real cause for joy. In fact, it is cause for continuous joy, as Jesus used a present imperative (*chairete*) to make the point.”⁷⁴ The real blessing is eternal life with God and nothing less. Nolland further elaborates about the joy of the assurance of knowing that one’s name is in the Book of Life when he says, “An assured place in the kingdom of God is the supreme benefit that emerges through the experience of God’s grace in the ministry of Jesus.”⁷⁵ The disciples can rejoice in knowing that they will participate in the kingdom of God in the future. The next use of the term that seems to imply permanent inscription in the Book of Life is found in Philippians 4:3.

Philippians 4:3 says, “And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life.” Paul seems to make a passing remark that his true companions in the faith have their names written in the Book of Life. Paul knew that these believers had their names in the Book of Life because they were working along side him for the gospel. They had proven that the grace of God was at work in their lives through their actions. He did not always express such confidence that one’s name was written in the Book of Life, but their fight with Paul for the gospel gave him great confidence in their salvation.⁷⁶ It was why he had confidence that the Lord would finish

⁷⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: from Biblical Text to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 294.

⁷⁵ John Nolland, *Luke. 9:21-18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 566.

⁷⁶ Richard R Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 32, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), 147.

the work that He had started in them (Phil 1:6). The pronoun “whose” in verse three seems to refer to Clement, Euodia, Syntyche, and the rest of Paul’s fellow workers. All of them had their names written in the Book of Life, and it appeared that their names remained in it even while they were quarreling. Hebrews 12:23 is another compelling verse that indicates there are names that are never removed from the Book of Life.

The context of Hebrews 12 is the discipline of true believers from the Lord. In the midst of discipline the believer can approach the Lord with confidence and be thankful that he or she will enter God’s unshakable kingdom. Only when one knows that He or she is secure and that the Lord will not abandon them can true honesty and vulnerability occur. Hebrews 12:18-21 paints a picture of the fear and unapproachability of God in the Old Covenant. The Israelites were terrified of the LORD on Mount Sinai surrounded with darkness, fire and loud trumpet blasts, but Hebrews 12:22-24 presents the current reality of the New Covenant where believers can have full access to God.⁷⁷ The New Covenant is loaded with comforting promises such as angels in joyful assembly, the spirits of the righteous made perfect, Jesus as the mediator because of His shed blood, and the names of those who are in the Church of the firstborn written in heaven. The contrast between the Israelites in the Old Covenant and Christians in the New Covenant is astonishing. Allen remarks about this contrast, “The trembling congregation of Israel, gathered solemnly at the base of the mountain, is superseded by the assembly of those whose names are permanently inscribed in the heavenly archives.”⁷⁸ Hebrews 12:23 says, “... and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge

⁷⁷ George H Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 419.

⁷⁸ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 419.

of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect...” Allen notes that the use of the perfect tense for “written” implies that their names have been “inscribed permanently.”⁷⁹ These divine assurances, including the fact that Christians have had their names registered in heaven, are intended to encourage believers to boldly approach Him. The responsibility of the believer in this context is in the fact that he or she will experience the discipline of the Lord, which proves they are not illegitimate children (Heb 12:8). If a person does not experience the discipline of the Lord then he or she should take care to ensure they are truly in the faith. The last example of a passage that seems to ascribe permanent inscription in the Book of Life is found in the letter to Sardis.

Revelation 3:5 says, “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.” There is a clear example of human responsibility associated with this passage in Matthew 10:32-33 where Christ explains that only those who acknowledge Him before men will be acknowledged by Christ in heaven, but divine grace is also heavy in this passage in the promise that those who overcome will never be blotted out of the Book of Life. This paper has reasonably demonstrated that overcomers are genuine believers. In addition, this verse is located in the promise section of the letter, which should provide comfort for those to which it applies. Indeed, He says He will never blot out their names.

Names that are Blotted Out

⁷⁹ David Lewis Allen, *Hebrews*, vol. 35, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 592.

There seems to be a second group classified as those who have their names removed from the Book of Life. It appears that lost people are more prominent in this category, but this group can consist of both believers and the lost. The Scripture does not always reveal the distinction. It is important to understand that the discipline of the Lord for believers can consist of physical death, but that does not have to indicate that He removes him or her from eternal life. Indeed, there are genuine believers that commit sins that lead to severe discipline. This discipline includes having their flesh handed over to Satan in order to learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim 1:20), having their flesh destroyed by Satan in order to save their spirit for salvation (1 Cor 5:5), weakness, illness, and physical death (1 Cor 11:30). Indeed, there are sins that result in immediate death (Acts 5:5,10) by the Lord, which prayers of the saints cannot prevent (1 John 5:16). For believers are temples of the Holy Spirit, and the Lord can and does destroy those who destroy that holy temple (1 Cor 3:17). The Lord judges Christians in these harsh ways because in His mercy He disciplines them so that they may not be condemned along with the world (1 Cor 11:32). The grace of God has been accepted and displayed in some form in every Christian's life, but that does not exclude the possibility that a believer will commit sins that lead to the disciplines discussed, including even death. The consequence of having one's name removed from the Book of Life in the Old Testament appears to include physical death. The first example of names removed from the Book of Life resulting in physical death is Exodus 32:32-33.

Exodus 32:32-33 says, "Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written. And the Lord said to Moses, 'Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book.'" This verse is in

response to the Israelites' grave sin against the Lord of making a golden calf (Ex 32:1). God reveals Himself as merciful, but He also consistently disciplines the Israelites for their sins. The Lord does not utterly forgive the Israelites nor accepts Moses' request for his own name to be removed from the Book of Life. It is important to know that Moses was not asking to be eternally condemned since he did not know it was a possibility. Indeed, the Israelites did not have a clear understanding about eternity. There seems to be a progressive revelation from the Old to the New Testament that the Book of life pertains to eternal life in God's presence. The Israelite concept of the afterlife before Christ consisted of their understanding of Sheol, a gloomy destination. "The dominant view is that after death individuals go to Sheol, a colorless, shadowy underworld where they are cut off from all that makes life worth living, including even the presence of God himself."⁸⁰ Wayne Patton addresses the topic of Sheol in great depth. The term is found in Genesis and is used throughout the Old Testament. The Hebrew concept of Sheol was not limited to one era, but survived throughout their history.⁸¹ He correctly argues that Sheol is the destination for the spirits of the deceased. The Hebrew understanding of Sheol was a place of subterranean gloom.⁸² There were evidences of hope beyond the grave in the Old Testament such as Daniel 12:2-3, Isaiah 26:19, and Psalm 16:10, but overall the Old Testament saints did not yearn for the afterlife. Therefore, Moses was not asking to be eternally condemned, but his request to be blotted out with the rest of Israel was still quite brave in light of their comprehension of the afterlife.

⁸⁰ Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 894.

⁸¹ Wayne Allan Patton, "An Examination of the Doctrine of Death and the Afterlife from a Biblical and Historical Theology Perspective Compared to the Level of Sophistication Among the Laity." (PhD diss., Liberty University, 2015), 40.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 39.

In light of the fact that Moses was not asking to be eternally condemned, Moses seemed to convince the Lord to relent from consuming the Israelites because of their sin in worshiping the golden calf in Exodus 32:11-13, but he was not successful from preventing discipline. God did not consume them, but He also did not immediately cover their sins.⁸³ The Levites had already killed 3,000 of their brethren at Moses' request, but Moses desired atonement for the rest without further punishment. He did not want to see any more people die, but the Lord denied his request and sent a plague on the Israelites that sinned against Him (Ex 32:33, 35). This is an example of divine grace and mediation, but also human responsibility in choosing to sin against the Lord. The Lord was to them God-Who-Forgives, though He took vengeance on their deeds (Ps 99:8).⁸⁴ God disciplined the Israelites for their sins, which took the form of physical death, but He never punished His people with the wrath that their sins deserved. Indeed, He forgave the sins of His people since the Exodus, but disciplined them as necessary (Psalm 78:38-39; Numbers 14:19-20). Many physical deaths resulted from their sin, but that did not necessarily mean the Lord condemned them. Deuteronomy 9:14 is the parallel passage to Exodus 32:32-33.

The Lord expressed His desire to remove the Israelites from the land of the living in order to reinitiate His plan through Moses' offspring. Deuteronomy 9:14 says, "Let me alone, that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven; and I will make of you a nation mightier and greater than they." All of the Israelites were almost blotted out of the Book of Life from under heaven because of their own sins, but Moses had interceded on their behalf. The fact that the Lord requested that Moses leave Him

⁸³ Hamilton, *Exodus*, 556.

alone in order that He may wipe out the Israelites revealed the special relationship that He had with Moses. The text shows that the Lord relented from a harsher penalty due to Moses' intercession for the Israelites. God promised Moses that He would make him into a nation even stronger and more in number than the Canaanites, which was a greater promise than Exodus 32 depicted.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, Moses refused to accept the offer and pleaded for the LORD to not punish the Israelites any further (9:18-19). Again, grace and mediation on behalf of the Israelites is demonstrated, but also penalty for their sins. In addition, blotting out the Israelites from "under heaven" seems to infer physical ramifications rather than spiritual. Removing them from the land of the living "under heaven" does not necessarily impact their spiritual destinations. The final example of a passage that seems to indicate the removal of names from the Book of Life is Psalm 69:28.

David prayed in Psalm 69 for his enemies to be blotted out of the Book of Life, which probably indicated lost people removed from the Book of Life. The same verb used in Exodus 32, *mâchâh*, is used to indicate the removal of names written in the Book of Life. Psalm 69:28 says, "Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous." Psalm 69 is a Psalm of lament, but mostly a protest of innocence. In verse four David stated that his enemies hated him "without cause." and in verse fourteen he pleads to be delivered from those who hate him. David prayed for his enemies to be blotted out of the book of the living. This imprecatory prayer refers back to verse twenty-five where David prayed that God kill them. David wanted his enemies to experience the same pain he had suffered. Block remarks on this passage:

⁸⁵ Daniel Block, *Deuteronomy*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 294.

As they have fed him poison and vinegar, so may their table bring about their own ruin. As his eyes have been swollen with weeping, so may their eyes no longer see. As he has been ostracized by his own family, so may their homes be desolate. May they experience the full fury of God's wrath even to the point of having their names removed from the Book of Life.⁸⁶

Verses 2-22 portray David praying for deliverance, but he then began to pray for justice for those who were wrongfully persecuting him.⁸⁷ The specific requests in Psalm 69 are that his enemies may have their fellowship, food, strength, divine mercy, and their families taken from them.⁸⁸ The unrighteous prove their position by hating David without a cause (Ps 69:4). David reminds the reader in Psalm 69 that the gap is not because the righteous are without sin. David confessed his sin to the Lord in verse five, and relied upon Him with an assurance that he was part of the righteous. The request for the enemies to have their names removed from the Book of Life is referring to earthly life, but it is proper to read into the text a possibility that eschatological features are in play as well since there is a distinction between the righteous and wicked. Tate does not find sufficient evidence to state emphatically that the reference to the Book of Life in this passage is about earthly or heavenly consequences. He finds the language to be too general to know for sure.⁸⁹ His enemies were most likely not children of the Lord, and David wanted them killed, which David expressed by asking God to remove them from the Book of Life.

⁸⁶ Block, *Deuteronomy*, 232.

⁸⁷ Marvin E Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 199.

⁸⁸ Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 199.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 200.

Remember, the Old Testament emphasizes the physical ramifications of the Book of Life while the New Testament emphasizes the spiritual. This can help explain why there are multiple references to names blotted out of the Book of Life in the Old Testament, but possibly no indications that names are removed from it in the New Testament. Names that are blotted out in the Old Testament do not necessarily mean they were not saved since the discipline of the Lord can involve physical death.

Those who Never had their Names in the Book

The final category for the Book of Life includes those who never had their names written in it. The contrast between the relationships of the Lord to those written in His Book and those not written is striking. The passages for this section of those not written in His book include Ezekiel 13:9, Malachi 3:16, and Rev 13:8; 17:8, and the contrasting examples of God's intimate knowledge of those in the book is found in Psalm 56:8; 139:16.

The first example of those not written in the Book of Life is Ezekiel 13:9. The verse says, "My hand will be against the prophets who envision futility and who divine lies; they shall not be in the assembly of My people, nor be written in the record of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord God." This was a harsh penalty from the Lord. The three punishments for the false prophets strike at the heart of what it meant to be a true Israelite. First, to be in the assembly of God's people meant to share in the community of faith. Not only were the false prophets excluded from the divine council, but they also were excluded from the earthly community of God's people.⁹⁰ Second, the false prophets were not to have their names written in the record of the house of Israel. They were excluded from the civil

⁹⁰ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 404.

census list of the house of Israel. Third, the false prophets were not to return to the land of Jerusalem even if their false predictions of early return to the land were true.⁹¹ To not be recorded with the people rids the false prophets of full participation in the community.⁹² They incurred this penalty because they misled God's people (13:10). Their behavior proved they were not part of God's people, and the Lord did not intend to have their names recorded. The second example of names that are not written in God's book is Malachi 3:16.

Malachi 3:16 is the final reference to God's book in the Old Testament and the only place where "Book of Remembrance" is used in Scripture. The book of Malachi is a vivid reminder that not all of the Israelites belonged to the Lord (Rom 9:6-9). In fact, the majority of Israelites that Malachi addressed were classified as wicked while the group of faithful Israelites demonstrated their genuine faith by their disagreement with them and by their fear of the Lord. Malachi chapters one and two describe the rebellious hearts of the Israelites. They claimed that God did not love them (Mal 1:2). The priests despised God's name by offering polluted food as offerings (1:7) while teaching with partiality (2:9). In addition, the Israelites were divorcing their spouses in vast numbers (2:14). They were confusing good with evil and wearied the Lord by asking, "Where is the God of Justice (2:17)?" Finally, they were robbing God of His tithe (3:8) and claiming there was no point in serving Him since evildoers prospered and received no punishment (3:13-15). In the midst of all the complaining arose a group of believers that feared the Lord. Pieter A. Verhoef notes, "For the first time it became evident that a remnant of true believers

⁹¹ Ibid, 405.

⁹² Iain M. Duguid. *Ezekiel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 173.

was prepared to testify against the malicious gossip of the people at large.”⁹³ The Lord will spare those who serve Him on the Day of Judgment, and classify all who do not serve Him as wicked (3:18). The distinction is clear: those who fear the Lord are the righteous ones who are recorded in the Book of Remembrance while the remainder are wicked and will be consumed by the coming judgment of the Lord (4:1). Verhoef succinctly remarks, “We do not have to differentiate further between the different groups of people in Israel at that time. The Day of the Lord will disclose the existence of two groups only: those who fear and serve the Lord and those who do not.”⁹⁴ Matthew 25:31-46 is an excellent parallel passage that reveals the distinction between the righteous and the wicked. Those who belong to the Lord prove their membership in God’s family by feeding the hungry, giving a drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, and visiting the prisoner (Matt 25:34-36). The wicked do not do perform these acts, and are sent to eternal punishment (25:45-46). The third example of names that are not written is found in Revelation 13:8.

Revelation 13:8 has been interpreted to mean that there are people who never had their names in the Book of Life. It reads, “All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” The Antichrist (beast from the sea) will have authority over all nations and will overcome the saints on earth. Everyone whose names were not written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world will worship the Antichrist. Aune argues that the translation should read: “...whose name has not been

⁹³ Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, The New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 319.

⁹⁴ Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, 319.

written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.” He says it is grammatically acceptable to translate the verse this way, and probably should be translated in this manner since Revelation 17:8 also refers to the unwritten names from the foundation of the earth. It appears Aune may have interpreted Revelation 13:8 incorrectly through the lens of 17:8. The biblical witness appears to indicate that this verse is referring to the fact that the Lord foreknew that Christ was going to die for His people. Peter had previously asserted that the precious blood of Christ, like a lamb without spot or blemish, was foreknown before the foundation of the world and revealed in these last times for His people (1 Peter 1:19-20). This reference matches well with Revelation 13:8 concerning the Book of Life of the Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world. This verse does not discount the possibility that names were not written since the foundation of the world, but the emphasis is on the Lamb that was slain. The following passage, however, does emphasize the names that were not written since the foundation of the world.

Revelation 17:8 clearly indicates that there are people who have never had their names in the Book of Life. The verse says, “The beast that you saw was, and is not, and will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition. And those who dwell on the earth will marvel, whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.” Those who dwell on the earth and did not have their names written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world will marvel at the Antichrist. The end-time kingdom that rises up against the Lord will be overcome by the Lamb, and those who are called, chosen, and faithful join Him in His victory (Revelation 17:14). Paige Patterson correctly asserts that God has

acted to choose some to salvation, but how this fact works along side human responsibility is a mystery. It is clear, however, that the ones who are chosen and called by God are faithful. Their faithfulness is displayed in this passage by the fact that they do not marvel over the Antichrist. There appears to be people who have never had their names in the Book of Life, which contrasts sharply with those who the Lord has an intimate relationship with in His book. Psalm 56:8, Psalm 87:6, and Psalm 139:14 depict this intimate relationship.

The three indirect references to the Book of Life in the Psalter include Psalm 56:8, 87:6, and 139:16. These verses illustrate God's intimate knowledge of His people. Psalm 56:8 says, "You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?" C. Hassell Bullock interprets the verse as metaphorically referring to the fact that the Lord pays careful attention to His peoples sorrow.⁹⁵ He does not forget the sorrows of His people, but records them in His book. Psalm 87 indirectly refers to a list as well, but it is God's list. "It is, among others, said that he (Yahweh) records, as he registers the peoples (87:6)."⁹⁶ The people recorded their citizens, but the Lord had a list of His own.⁹⁷ The final reference is found in Psalm 139:16, which says, "Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them." The days that were fashioned for David were written for him before he was born. It is comforting to

⁹⁵ C. Hassell Bullock, *Psalms*, vol. 1, *Psalms 1-72*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2015), 427.

⁹⁶ Groenewald, "The 'Book of Life' (Psalm 69:29)," 96.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 97.

know that every moment and every day is planned by the Lord who knows His people.⁹⁸ How superior it is to have one's name in the Book of Life! In looking at the usage of the phrase "Book of Life" in the book of Revelation as a whole, Fuller notes that every passage that refers to the Book of Life contrasts the wicked and the righteous except for Revelation 3:5. The presence or absence of one's name in the book is all that is needed for John to make his point.⁹⁹ It seems that the members of the church of Sardis are exhorted to make sure their names are in the Book of Life. Christ wanted them to have assurance that they were genuine believers. The research concerning the two key phrases of "overcome" and "Book of Life" now better enable the exegetical analysis of Revelation 3:1-6.

⁹⁸ Mark David Futago, "The Book of Psalms," in *The Book of Psalms and The Book of Proverbs*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, ed. Phillip W. Comfort (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Pub, 2009), 415.

⁹⁹ Fuller, "I will not erase his name from the book of life' (Revelation 3:5)," 300.

Chapter 5

Exegesis of Revelation 3:1-6

Finally, it is time to examine the letter as a whole. The letter to Sardis seems to indicate a church filled with both lost and saved individuals. Verse one emphasizes the importance of the Holy Spirit and godly messengers and the spiritual condition of the church. Revelation 3:1 says, “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, these things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: ‘I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.’” Patterson understands the verb “to hold” (*echo*) to mean “has” instead of “hold.” The relationship is what is in view in this context. Christ had both the seven spirits and the seven stars.¹⁰⁰ MacArthur believes that the reference to the seven spirits is a description of the Holy Spirit. He points to Isaiah 11:2 as his defense because it describes the Holy Spirit in seven characteristics. Another possible defense for the seven spirits symbolizing the Holy Spirit can be found in Zechariah 4:1-10 (according to MacArthur) since the menorah can be referring to the Holy Spirit. The only hope for dead spiritual lives is the presence of the Holy Spirit. MacArthur views the seven stars as the seven elders responsible for bringing the letters to their respective churches. The Lord utilized godly leaders throughout the Scripture and there is no reason to dismiss He is doing the same here.¹⁰¹ Blount affirms the assessment that the stars are the angels, or messengers, who represent the churches while the seven

¹⁰⁰ Patterson, *Revelation*, 121.

¹⁰¹ MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11*, 109.

spirits represent the Holy Spirit. Although their “name” has a reputation for being alive, they are dead. The Lord introduced Himself to the church as the One who worked through the Spirit and godly leaders. Perhaps they were lacking both of those essential elements in their church.

Christ declared the verdict of the church’s overall spiritual state: dead. They had become a church in name only for most of the people, except the faithful few that Christ mentioned. E. W. Bullinger correctly reasons that Christ does not refer to people who know Him as “dead.” It is hard to believe that those who are in Christ are called “dead” by Him.¹⁰² Jesus was not afraid to tell people their true spiritual condition. This direct pronouncement from Him sounds familiar to His denouncement of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They had the reputation of knowing the Lord intimately, but were diagnosed by Christ as having a reputation of beauty, but their insides were full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean (Matt 23:27).

It is possible that the Lord was using metaphorical language for the awful spiritual condition of the Christians in Sardis, but it seems more likely in this letter that He was contrasting the lost people in the church with those who were saved and could look forward to be clothed by Him in white and have their names confessed before the Father and His angels. A common objection is that the letter was addressed to the “church” of Sardis, which supposedly eliminates the possibility that there were lost people among them. In anticipation of this argument, consider that Paul and Peter did not share the opinion that everyone in a church was saved. Paul showed incredible grace to the church of Corinth as they had many heinous sins, but he also urged them to check themselves to

¹⁰² Ethelbert William Bullinger, *Commentary on Revelation*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel Publications, 1984, 192.

make sure they were in the faith (2 Cor 13:5). Peter also exhorted the church to make their calling and election sure (2 Pet 1:10). Jesus called the church dead. How does Johannine literature utilize the word, “dead?”

In the Book of John the word “dead” is mostly used to describe physical death, and indicates that Christ raises people from the dead (5:21, 25; 6:58, 11:25, 44; 12:1, 9, 17) and defeats death through His resurrection (2:22; 20:9; 21:14). The word “dead” in Revelation 3:1 does not refer to physical death, but to a spiritual condition, which necessitates the study of the word in reference to spiritual condition in the New Testament.

How does the Bible utilize the word “dead” in reference to the spiritual condition of believers and the lost in the New Testament? Believers, on the one hand, are dead to sin (Rom 6:2, 11) and should present their members as instruments of righteousness rather than unrighteousness since they have been brought from death to life (Rom 6:13). They have died to the law and live for God (Gal 2:19). Unbelievers, on the other hand, are dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1, 5; Col 2:13). Their works are dead because they have no faith in Christ (Heb 6:1). They cannot serve God with a clear conscience from dead works because they do not trust in Christ’s blood (Heb 9:14). Ephesians 5:14 sheds much light about this topic. Paul reminds the believers in Ephesians five that they used to be unbelievers. Before coming to Christ they were sexually immoral, impure, covetous, and idolaters who had no inheritance in God’s kingdom (Ephesians 5:3-6). They used to be “sons of disobedience” and “darkness,” but now they are “light” in the Lord (Eph 5:6-9). Christ tells them to let their light shine to expose the darkness. Ephesians 5:14 exclaims, “...Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will

shine on you.” Jesus pronounces the church of Sardis “dead” and then proceeds to tell them to “wake up.” The biblical evidence supports the position that Christ was addressing some unsaved individuals with this letter.

Verse two says, “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.” The word Christ used for “complete” or “perfect” is from the perfect passive participle of *plēroō*. This word should be translated as “full” or “filled” according to Patterson in this context.¹⁰³ The church in Sardis had not fulfilled the requirements that Christ expected it to achieve. Blount believes the neuter form of the adjective “remains” refers to the remaining works that are about to die.¹⁰⁴ Not everyone shares this interpretation. Stefanovik does not believe that since the term “the remaining ones” is a neuter adjective, it therefore must refer to things instead of people. He cites other verses that use the neuter adjective that clearly refer to people, including 1 Corinthians 1:27-28 and Hebrews 7:7.¹⁰⁵ Aune declares that the mandate for the church to strengthen the weaker members can be read in light of Ezekiel 34:4 where God charged His people for not strengthening the weak.¹⁰⁶ He commanded those select few who were truly saved and had a measure of spiritual maturity to build up the rest of the congregation. Smalley agrees with Aune and references Ezekiel 34:4 in light of this command.¹⁰⁷ The first part of the verse should

¹⁰³ Patterson, *Revelation*, 122.

¹⁰⁴ Blount, *Revelation*, 67.

¹⁰⁵ Stefanović, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 138.

¹⁰⁶ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 219.

¹⁰⁷ Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 81.

therefore be translated, “strengthen those who remain but are at the point of death.”¹⁰⁸

The fact that Christ said in verse four that there were some who had not soiled their garments adds to the possibility that He was referring to people in this verse as well.

Beale says that the “remaining things” implies that some have begun the Christian life, but have not progressed. They still have work to do to prove their genuine faith.¹⁰⁹ While his assertion alludes to the possibility of nominal Christianity in the church, he also questions if the “name” Christian really applies to these people. His doubt concerning their spiritual life is well deserved. Perhaps “The remaining ones” does not have to refer to either works or people, but it can indicate both. If there were numerous genuine believers in the church of Sardis the result would be a church “filled” with works. If the church was “filled” with works acceptable to Christ it would also “filled” with genuine Christians.

Verse three says, “Remember therefore what you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.” Christ urged the church to remember His teaching as opposed to the incorrect teaching that accommodation to Greco-Roman cultic social life was acceptable. In addition their lack of faithfulness in confessing Christ’s name among their culture may have been a pressing concern. The command to “remember” was a present imperative that urged the citizens of Sardis to continually remember what they had previously learned.¹¹⁰ The Lord was seeking for a

¹⁰⁸ Ben Witherington, *Revelation*, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 105.

¹⁰⁹ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 273.

¹¹⁰ Stefanović, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 138.

transformation of the people's hearts and minds and not a one-time cognitive recollection. They must "keep" what they have been taught and also repent from turning away from it. The Greek word "keep," *tēreo*, is connected with faithfulness in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 3:8 Christ celebrated those who "kept" His word and did not deny His name. In Revelation 3:10 He praised the faithful believers who "kept" in their perseverance in the faith despite social temptations to reform. In addition, Revelation 12:17 revealed the dragon fighting those who resisted him by "keeping" to the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. Finally, John's angelic guide proclaimed that he was a fellow servant with John, the prophets, and all who "keep" the words of this book (Rev 22:19). John asserted in three of his seven blessings that the blessed person was the one who "kept" to the faithful witness that the book commanded (1:3; 16:15; 22:7).¹¹¹ A true believer is one who perseveres in the faith and good works.

A correct understanding of this verse views what was "previously received" as referring to things like the word of God, soteriology, and all the manifestations of the grace of God. The church had to respond to the letter in repentance and turn back to the glorious message of redemption. MacArthur says the church was urged to remember the gospel and the teachings of the apostles. The unsaved members of the church of Sardis needed to repent for salvation. The few believers in the church that prevented it from utter lifelessness were not enough of a deterrent for the Lord not to judge the church. If the church did not change its spiritual condition as a whole the Lord promised to come and judge it.

¹¹¹ Blount, *Revelation*, 69.

Blount sees the warning of Christ's coming to them as a thief as conditioned upon their behavior. He may come to punish disobedience at a specific time before His Second Coming. The two comings of Christ involve one of discipline for believers and one of reunion with Him (Rev 2:25; 3:11; Rev 2:5, 16; 3:3).¹¹² His coming in judgment is conditional, but His Second coming is unconditional.¹¹³ Patterson agrees with the popular view that the possibility of Christ visiting the church is indeed a threat.¹¹⁴ Remember, the city was grievously familiar with the devastation from surprise attacks both from enemy nations and natural disasters such as the earthquake in 17 A.D. But this threat from the Lord Himself is of a much more serious nature, and therefore the warning should have been seriously considered. Indeed, those who did not wake up, remember the true gospel, keep it, and repent will not walk with Him in white, cannot have assurance that their names are in the Book of Life, and will not have their names confessed by Christ in the presence of His Father and His angels. Salvation is at stake for those who proved to be lost.

Verse four says, "You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy." Witherington notes the special significance this reference of clean garments had to a city such as Sardis who was famous for their appealing and popular clothing industry.¹¹⁵ The white garments in verse four likely symbolize both the Lord's grace and the Lord's approval of the saints'

¹¹³ Kendell H. Easley, *Revelation*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 55.

¹¹⁴ Patterson, *Revelation*, 122.

¹¹⁵ Witherington, *Revelation*, 106.

holy conduct and faithful living during their lives on earth based on the use of white garments in Revelation and a number of earlier references to it in Scripture.

Revelation has multiple verses that involve white garments, which include Revelation 3:18, 6:11, 7:9-14, and 19:7-14. These references highlight the importance of both grace and responsibility. Revelation 3:18; 6:11 underscores the necessity of righteous deeds in order to be clothed in white. Revelation 7:9-14; 19:7-14 highlight both the grace of God and righteous deeds in order to be clothed in white. Again, righteous acts are not necessary to earn salvation, but they manifest as a result from God's grace.

In Revelation 3:18 the Lord counseled the Laodicean church to buy from Him white garments to cover the nakedness and shame they should have felt. He said that He disciplined those He loved and therefore they should heed His warning and repent. Revelation 6:11 depicted saints who were murdered because they refused to deny the faith. This reference explained that the saints around God's throne were given white robes because of the Word of God and because of the testimony they had maintained. This is an example of purity that results from endurance in the midst of fiery trials.¹¹⁶ Revelation 7:9-14 displayed the martyrs of the Great Tribulation wearing white robes. It explained that they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The sins of those who wore them were forgiven by the blood of the Lamb.¹¹⁷ Revelation 19:7-14 shows all of God's army behind Him in fine linen, white and pure. Verse eight described the fine linen as representing the righteous deeds of the saints while verse fourteen described the robes as white because they were washed in the blood of the

¹¹⁶ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 277.

¹¹⁷ David E. Aune, *Revelation. 6-16*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1998), 475.

Lamb. Revelation 22:14 echoed this same concept of the dual role of grace and responsibility. The robes were washed in the blood of the Lamb to be made white (pure), and they also symbolized the righteous deeds of the saints. The grace of God and the responsibility of the saints are not contradictory. They are harmonious. They are wedded. They paint the picture of a true believer who has been saved by grace alone, but saving grace always manifests itself through righteous deeds.¹¹⁸

Earlier references to white garments symbolized a divine nature. For example, God was wearing white in Daniel 7, Christ's clothes became radiant and white on the Mount of Transfiguration in Matthew 17, and an angel wore white clothing at the empty tomb in Matthew 28.¹¹⁹ In addition, the Psalmist declared that the Lord was clothed with majesty and splendor, covered with light as with a garment (Ps 104:2). Astonishingly, Christians can anticipate an awesome future that will include God clothing them in white and partaking of His divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). In contrast to white garments, unclean garments in the Scripture represent unrighteousness and bad character as demonstrated in verses such as Zechariah 3:3-5, Jude 23 and Isaiah 64:6.¹²⁰

The church of Sardis was filled with mostly unregenerate individuals, and the few faithful Christians still present were not enough for the Lord to designate the church as alive. MacArthur cites Romans 11:1-5 to remind the reader that God preserves for Himself a faithful remnant despite rampant unbelief.¹²¹ The true believers had not yet soiled their garments. The true believers proved the indwelling of the Holy Spirit by

¹¹⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2014), 49.

¹¹⁹ Blount, *Revelation*, 70.

¹²⁰ Blount, *Revelation*, 70.

¹²¹ MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11*, 113.

refusing to jeopardize their character. There were still some wheat among the tares who have not soiled their garments. As MacArthur has said, “Those who have a measure of holiness and purity now will be given perfect holiness and purity in the future.”¹²²

Verse five says, “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will never blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.” “The Greek word *nikaō* means ‘to be the victor,’ ‘to be victorious,’ ‘to overcome.’ The present participle implies continuous victory, ‘keeps on overcoming’ or ‘continues to be victorious.’”¹²³ Continual war seems to be the lot of Christians who follow their Lord faithfully. The promises from the Lord indicate salvation and the blessings that accompany salvation. He says that for those who conquer He will clothe in white garments, never blot out their names from the Book of Life, and confess their names before His father and His angels in heaven. As previously discussed, these promises point to hope of spending eternity in the presence of the Lord. The biblical witness affirms that these promises symbolize salvation.

The promise to clothe the overcomers in white garments also indicates salvation because of the ties with justification. In Zechariah 3:3-5 the removal of filthy garments symbolizes the forgiveness of sin, and to be clothed with clean garments completes the justification.¹²⁴ Another affirmation that the clean garments symbolize salvation is the fact that the garments are made white by the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14).

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Stefanović, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 116.

¹²⁴ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 278.

According to Matthew 10:32-33, Jesus promises to confess the names of believers that acknowledge Him, but will deny those who deny Him. To be denied by Christ cannot indicate salvation. The context of Matthew 10 is endurance in the midst of persecution. He says in Matthew 10:22b, “But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” Those who endure to the end are those who persevere in the faith. There will be some who claim that they confessed Christ, but He will say He never knew them (Matt 7:23). The important fact concerning salvation is that the Lord confesses the name of the believer. Therefore, Christ confessing their name symbolizes salvation and from the review of verse four it is reasonable to believe that to be clothed in white garments symbolizes salvation. The final promise that Christ will never remove the name from the Book of Life also seems to indicate salvation.

Patterson affirms the possibility that the promise to never be blotted out of the Book of Life aligns with the view of the Israelite registry against the backdrop of the Athenian practice to erase a citizen’s name before execution, but he also perceives another factor in play. His view is that the promise is given to the church in Sardis in light of the issue of the curse of the Minim. James M. Hamilton also adheres to this view although he admits it cannot be proven. He says it is hypothetical, but perhaps the Jews erased the names of Christians who confessed Christ openly, which exposed them to hostile Rome.¹²⁵ He argues that the promise that Christ will confess those who confess Him may indicate that the church of Sardis was not confessing His name. This can explain the incomplete works of the church.¹²⁶ Hamilton correctly notes the possibility

¹²⁵ Hamilton, *Revelation*, 106.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

that the heavy Jewish population in Sardis intimidated the believers in the church. At some point the Curse of the Minim was added to the eighteen benedictions that the Jews prayed everyday. He indicates that the Curse of the Minim may directly relate to why Christ promised to never blot out the names of the believers.¹²⁷

The curse of the Minim read as follows: “May the Nazarene and the Minim suddenly perish and may they be blotted out of the book of life and not enrolled along with the righteous.”¹²⁸ It was a Jewish curse on those who were perceived as heretics. It is a possibility that most of the church members in Sardis made an agreement with the Jewish synagogue in order to avoid any possibility of this threat. The Jews may have exposed the Christians who confessed Jesus to the cruel hand of emperor Domitian.¹²⁹ Hemer referred to this agreement between the Christians and Jews as a “modus vivendi,” or peaceful agreement between two conflicting parties, and stated the likelihood that the Jews forged the requirements of such an agreement.¹³⁰ Fortunately, the promise of Christ to never erase their names from the true Book of Life was an encouraging word in the midst of their circumstances.

It is important to note the use of “name” in this verse for further illumination. As Fuller had stated in his article, the “name” in verse one is referring to reputation. Those who remain faithful to the Lord will prove to truly belong to Him, but those who have

¹²⁷ Ibid., 107.

¹²⁸ Patterson, *Revelation*, 123.

¹²⁹ Scott Duvall, *Revelation*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2014), 67.

¹³⁰ Patterson, *Revelation*, 123.

only a reputation for knowing the Lord will not be recognized by Him and prove that their names were never in the Book of Life.¹³¹

Verse six states, ““He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”” This final exhortation is given to all of the churches, and it reminds all believers that the Scripture is meant for all of God’s children to read and take to heart. After all, the entirety of the Bible is given to equip the saints with doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction regarding righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). What Christ said to this group of Christians can apply to all Christians throughout the ages. He is intending for the letters to be read by not only the individual group of believers that are addressed, but also all churches. The fact that all churches were to read and benefit from the letters help support the argument that all of the promises for overcomers are intended to point to the overarching promise of the glorious eternal state for all believers. In addition, all believers can take comfort that God will clothe them in white, never blot out their names from the Book of Life, and Jesus will confess their names before His Father and the heavenly angels.

¹³¹ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 280.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The church of Sardis seemed to include lost people, but also some genuine believers. Some needed to hear encouragement from the Lord while others were in desperate need of exhortation. The context of the letter indicates that the potential threat of the loss of salvation is located in promise section of the letter. In addition, the omission of accommodations from the Lord sets forth the serious problem with the church's spiritual condition. This becomes less surprising since the research of the letter has shown sufficient evidence to believe that there were lost people in the church. The wealth and location of the church may have led to their dead spiritual condition over time. The unfortunate surprise attacks against the city may explain why Christ decided to use the terminology of a "thief" in describing the coming judgment if they did not repent. Also, the pagan deity in Sardis that supposedly granted life may be another indication of why Christ used the terminology that He did. They were as dead as their pagan false god. Lastly, the heavy Jewish presence and the potential of their curse against the church may explain why the Lord desired to comfort the true believers in telling them He will never blot out their names from His Book of Life.

The study for those who overcome gave reasonable evidence to conclude that all genuine believers are overcomers, genuine believers demonstrate they are overcomers through their faith and faithfulness, and all of the promises to those who overcome point to the one glorious promise that believers will step into an eternity of God's presence.

The summary of John's use of overcome is this: the grace of God is manifest through Christ on behalf of all believers to enable them to have victory in the face of tribulation and false teaching through their faith in Him, which is inevitably demonstrated through their behavior in light of the anticipation of the glorious future with Christ in eternity. The emphasis of the letter should be about ensuring that one has genuine faith, not worrying about losing salvation. The promises were not meant for a special category of saints, but for all genuine believers. These promises motivated the genuine believers, but also sought to convert the lost in Sardis.

The study for the Book of Life enumerates the three categories concerning the names in it: names of believers that have their names permanently inscribed, the names of those who have their names blotted out of the Book of Life, and people who have never had their names in the Book of Life. The people in each category show evidence that they belong in it. The grace of God and responsibility of man are both at play in these passages. The Lord's omniscience does not require a book containing records that He may forget. It is important to remember that the infinite is communicating with the finite, which requires the use of figurative language at times. The importance for the believer is to have assurance that his or her name is in the Book of Life by believing the gospel and demonstrating that their faith is genuine.

In light of the exegetical study of the letter to Sardis it is reasonable to believe that Christ was addressing lost people who claimed to be Christians. A true believer is one who perseveres in the faith and good works, which the Lord exhorted to be strengthened in their church. The assurance that true believers will not have their names blotted out of the Book of Life fits with the audience consisting of believers and lost people because it

does not threaten the genuine believers with the possibility of losing their salvation, but it also urges them to continue in the faith. The comfort that genuine believers are never erased from His Book was welcomed in the midst of the possible hostile Jewish community and the Curse of the Minim. The Lord knows who are His (2 Tim 2:9), and Christians can know they are His when their lives reflect the grace they have received.

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