

DOES GOD HAVE AN ERASER?

Dr. Vic Reasoner

Each of the seven letters in Revelation 2-3 closes with a promise to the overcomer. A popular teaching defines an overcomer as anyone who had truly trusted in Christ for salvation. Since all who have truly believed in Christ are overcomers, all who have truly believed also have been guaranteed eternal life. Those who do not overcome were never truly saved. This definition fails to emphasize, however, that this saving faith is a present tense, ongoing faith, not a one-time decision. Another popular view distinguishes between carnal Christians and spiritual Christians. While both groups are eternally secure, only the spiritual Christian receives the reward promised to the overcomer. Yet Howard Marshall observed that the rewards for conquerors in Revelation 2-3 are elsewhere assigned to all Christians: 2:7 with 22:2; 2:11 with 20:6, 14; 2:17 with 22:4; 2:26 with 22:5; 3:5 with 22:14; 3:12 with 22:3; 3:21 with 22:5. "In particular, ruling is stated to be the privilege of all believers (Revelation 1:5, 5:10; 22:5)" [*Kept by the Power of God*, p. 253].

The Wesleyan-Arminian position is that while true believers are indeed overcomers so long as they maintain an obedient faith, these believers are not guaranteed to persevere, but rather every true believer must persevere in order to fully realize the promises made to the overcomer. Thus, Jesus gives a conditional promise, that those who do overcome will be rewarded. According to Revelation 2:26 and 12:11 the overcomer is the one who keeps the works of Christ until the end.

In each of the seven churches there was something particular to be overcome. The promises were given by Jesus to encourage believers to endure to the end. In all, twelve promises are given. Of particular interest is the promise in Revelation 3:5 that he who overcomes will never have his name erased from the book of life.

What is the book of life? The phrase serves as a metaphor for God's memory. The Lord knows those who are his (2 Tim 2:19). The Old Testament declared that the righteous are written in God's book. In the New Testament this expresses the idea of assurance of salvation.

This divine register is first referenced in Exodus 32:32. Even under the old covenant, the name of Moses was written in God's book and according to Malachi 3:16 all who feared the Lord were written in heaven. Yet in Exodus 32:33 God himself warned against the possibility of being blotted out of his book. David prayed concerning his persecutors, "Do not let them share in your salvation. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be

listed with the righteous” (Psalm 69:27-28). Notice that when Judas was replaced as an apostle, Peter quotes from Psalm 69:25. According to Peter, David spoke by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:16). And David’s prayer was that apostates be blotted from the book of life. As a result of being blotted out of the book of life, Judas went to his own place — the place he had chosen (Acts 1:25).

Isaiah 4:3 teaches that those who are recorded among the living are the holy. According to Daniel 12:1, everyone written in the book escaped the great tribulation which came upon Jerusalem. Malachi 3:16-18 describes those who were written in God’s book of remembrance, which served to distinguish between the righteous and the wicked.

Luke 10:20 indicates that the names of the seventy evangelists were written in heaven. Philippians 4:3 speaks of those whose names are written in the book of life. Hebrews 12:23 declares that the church is enrolled in heaven. Our citizenship is in heaven and our names are written upon the register of that city.

Thus, with this biblical background, John makes reference to the book of life in Revelation 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12-15, 21:27, and perhaps in 22:19. Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 indicate that God in his foreknowledge wrote the name of every saved person in the book of life before the foundation of the world. Does that mean that God predestines those whom he will save? While God foreknows who will be saved, he does not predetermine their salvation.

Four hundred years ago Christopher Ness stated the Calvinistic position that “the Lamb’s book of life contains a catalog of the elect, determined by the unalterable counsel of God, which number can neither be increased nor diminished” because the elect were predestined by God before the foundation of the world and these alone were redeemed by Christ. If God predestined those whom he will save, why would he ever erase anyone out of this “register of the elect?” Presumably, the Calvinistic answer would be that those blotted out participated in covenant blessings, but were not elect. Yet this book is a book of eternal life, not a book of blessing.

The popular evangelical position today says that God does not predestine who will be saved, but that he has predestinated those who are saved can never be lost. Those who hold to unconditional security then offer six different explanations for Revelation 3:5:

Explanation #1

Only the redeemed are recorded in the book of life and Christ categorically promises never to erase a true Christian’s name. There is not an explicit statement that God will

blot out anyone's name. Revelation 3:5 is a litotes, a figure of speech that expresses less than what is intended. Since all who are truly saved are overcomers, this is actually a promise that their name will not be blotted out. According to Charles Stanley, "The good news is, God's pencil has no eraser" [*Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* p. 182].

Yet John Walvoord said the possibility of having a name blotted out is implied [Revelation, p. 82]. In a *JETS* article J. William Fuller wrote, "A command that everyone keeps is superfluous and a reward that everyone receives for a virtue that everyone has is nonsense" ["I Will Not Erase His Name," p. 299]. Robert L. Thomas wrote, "The promise to the overcomer is an empty one unless the possibility exists that such blotting out could occur. What incentive is furnished by being promised deliverance from something that could not happen?" [*Revelation 1-7*, p. 261].

Explanation #2

Everyone who ever lived is recorded in the book of life and at the end of their life those who never trusted in Christ to receive the gift of salvation are blotted out.

While this position is advocated by John Walvoord, Tim LaHaye, Hal Lindsey, and Robert Thomas, according to Revelation 17:8 not every name has been written in the book of life. James Rosscup argued that only the saved are ever listed in the book of life. "It seems to be eisegesis [reading presuppositions into a passage] to suggest that they were *in it* but *later removed* when they failed to receive Christ ["The Overcomer of the Apocalypse," p. 286]. Charles R. Smith argued from Luke 10:20 that if the names of all living humans were written in heaven there would be no point in telling any living person to rejoice because his name was written in heaven!" ["The Book of Life," p. 225]. Fuller concluded that both interpretations which have been presented lack exegetical integrity [p. 298].

Explanation #3

Unbelievers' names were written in the book of life in eternity past and were then blotted out prior to the creation of the world. Believer's names remain in the book unconditionally.

Walvoord admitted Revelation 13:8 "presents a number of problems" and so also adopts this view [*Revelation*, pp. 202-203] as an attempt to circumvent Revelation 17:8. Thomas also floundered at 13:8. He admitted that the names of those who worship the beast might never have been written in the book of life, but then argues that while they were in the book at one time, they then were removed, presumably before the time of creation

because God foreknew their disbelief and consequent disobedience. However, Thomas would not hold that believers' names could ever be removed because of disbelief and disobedience [*Revelation 4-22*, pp. 164-165].

Explanation #4

The "book of life" and the "Lamb's book of life" are two different books. The book of life contains the names of all mankind. The Lamb's book of life contains the names of only the redeemed. While unbelievers can be blotted out of the book of life, the redeemed can never be blotted out of the Lamb's book of life.

Rosscup concluded that only in the New Testament do references appear concerning the book of God that pertain to eternal life. MacArthur claimed Exodus 32:33 and Psalm 69:28 referred to physical death [*Revelation 1-11*, p. 115]. Yet Robert Thomas, Professor of New Testament at MacArthur's Master's Seminary, disputed the distinction between the interpretation that these Old Testament passages refer to the loss of physical life, while the New Testament passages refer to the loss of spiritual life. "This distinction is arbitrary, however. Consistency demands that both refer to spiritual death" [*Revelation 1-7*, p. 262].

Charles R. Smith surveyed sixteen passages in Scripture and concluded that the Old Testament refers to several divine registers or books. "It is unlikely that any refer to mere physical life alone. Rather, all specify the recipients of special divine blessings." But Smith also argued that since the Mosaic Covenant promised blessing, conditioned on obedience, a person's name could be blotted from a list of covenant blessings if he failed to fulfill the conditions. Here Smith created a false distinction between the Mosaic Covenant and other covenants, since all covenants are based upon conditions.

However, Smith concluded that by the New Testament only one book was under discussion and it was "the register of the elect." Smith asserted that names are never removed from it ["The Book of Life," pp. 219-230]. But Revelation 17:8 clearly teaches that everyone is not written in the book of life. Therefore, those blotted out in Revelation 3:5 cannot be unbelievers who were never entered into it, but backsliders who apostatized.

Explanation #5

Walter Scott claimed the "book of life" in Revelation 3:5 contains the names of professing believers, while the "book of life" in Revelation 13:8 contains the names of genuine believers. While the names of professing believers will be blotted out of the book of life,

no genuine believer will ever be blotted out. Matthew Henry's *Commentary* offered a similar explanation.

Yet this is the book of life, not a church roll. Grant Osborne wrote, "It is difficult to conceive why those with an empty profession would be included on such a list in the first place" [*Revelation*, p. 183]. Thomas rejected this view saying, "This explanation fails to indicate why a person with an empty profession had his or her name written in the book of life in the first place" [*Revelation 1-7*, p. 262]. And why would a name which was never entered in the book of life need to be erased?

Explanation #6

Fuller explained that in Revelation 3:1 "name" refers to reputation. Those who deny the faith will still enter eternal life, but Christ will be ashamed of them. They will lose the privileged reputation of the overcomer because their garments are soiled (v. 4).

However, 3:1 warns that while they have a good "name," Christ knows their true condition and they are actually dead. Therefore, the promise in 3:5 is not to those with a good reputation who are "dead," but to the few who have *not* soiled their garments. Those who are dead have been erased from the book of life.

In a desperate attempt to salvage eternal security, scholars such as Fuller, Rosscup, Thomas, Smith, and Walvoord have grasped at any attempted solution, sometimes offering more than one option. Often their conflicting explanations cancel each other out. While I have studied under a couple of these men and respect their scholarship, I am disappointed in their lack of objectivity in this instance. They seem uncertain about what the verse means, but they are sure about what it does not mean! They appear willing to go to any length to protect their presupposition. In his synopsis of "The Overcomer of the Apocalypse," Rosscup stated that the correct interpretation of the "overcomer" involves a "defense of the doctrines of eternal security and of the perseverance of the saints." Thus, eternal security becomes their foundational doctrine and everything else must be cut to fit.

Perhaps Revelation 3:5 could be more easily understood if we did not approach it with so much extra baggage. Let's consider a seventh possible interpretation. If God already knows who will be saved, why does he bother writing down names that he knows will later be erased? The only consistent answer is that their names were written down because they were once saved; their names were erased because they fell away. "The names of the good are often represented as registered in heaven (Luke 10:20). But this by no means implies a certainty of salvation, but only that at that time the persons were on the list, from which

(as in Rev 3:5), the names of unworthy members might be erased” [McClintock and Strong, *Cyclopedia*, 1:852].

Wesley taught that “if any who are saved make shipwreck of the faith, God will blot them out of his book, although they were written therein from before the foundation of the world.” Howard Marshall wrote,

The possibility of failure to endure is mentioned. Christians who fail to persevere will come under judgment and their names will be blotted out of the book of life. There is no reason to suppose that these warnings are purely hypothetical directed against non-existent dangers; the reverse is the case. Moreover, the reference to the book of life indicates that John is addressing his warning to believers [*Kept by the Power of God*, p. 175].

Yet we need not fall away. “This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4). Yet John describes this faith in the next verse as a present tense faith. The person who keeps on overcoming is the one who keeps on believing with active, trusting, obedient faith. Those who do not persevere will have their names blotted out of the Book of Life. Adam Clarke wrote, “Is it not evident that a soul could not be *blotted out of a book* in which it had *never been written*? And is it not farther evident from [Exodus 32:32-33] that, although a man *be written* in God’s book, if he *sins* he may be *blotted out*?”

In ancient times city registers contained the names of its citizens. There were two reasons why a name could be erased: committing a capital offense or death. Physical death can never separate us from life in Christ (Rom 8:38-39). Yet the church at Sardis had many who had grown careless and were about to die spiritually. Their names were about to be erased. Only a few were overcomers. Joseph Benson wrote, “This passage plainly implies, that some names shall be blotted out from the book of life: this is, some who, in consequence of their adoption and regeneration, were entitled to and fitted for eternal life, shall, through falling from grace, lose these blessings, and come again under guilt, condemnation, and wrath.”

If we understand apostasy to be a “capital offense” which results in spiritual death, then it is possible to understand how names which were recorded in the heavenly register could be blotted out. How long has it been since you received any confirmation from the Holy Spirit that your name can be found written in the book of life? Ben Witherington concluded that “one is not eternally secure until one is securely in eternity.”

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