

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God's Message to Seven Churches: Sardis: Not Blotted Out

He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches. (Revelation 3:5-6, KJV 1900)

This verse has seen many battles and shall likely see many more. What does the language "...not blot out his name out of the book of life" mean? Does it mean, as some interpret, that people may lose their eternal salvation if they fail to "Overcome"? I would simply observe that the passage says too much for that view. The lesson does not warn of losing one's place in the book of life; it rather assures the faithful, the "Overcomers," that their names are secure in that book.

A brief survey of similar terms throughout Scripture indicates at least two points that deserve our attention.

1. Scripture uses this term in more than one way. When Bible students give a life of its own to such terms and ignore the context in which the term appears, they guarantee an errant view of Scripture. We need to examine any term that we discover in Scripture in light of its contextual appearance. As a simple example, consider the English word "Trunk." Can you give one single definition of this English word that applies to it in any given context? Not at all. For example, you must examine the context to determine if the word refers to an elephant's snout, to the primary body of a large tree, to a box in which you store old family mementos, or to a container in the rear of your automobile where you store the spare tire and various items that you wish to take with you in the auto.
2. God's "Book," His taking note of or paying special attention to various people or to various actions, covers more than one aspect of our lives. Simply stated, God maintains many records, many different "Books," in His care. Indeed, one such record relates to the identity of those whom He chose in Christ before He created the material universe, a people whom Scripture repeatedly states shall never be lost or removed from that record. However, Scripture also refers to many other things—and people—whom God knows, including everything about them. It seems beyond naïve to think that our omniscient God

knows only one aspect of our persons and lives. For example, Malachi 3:16 refers to a "...book of remembrance..." that the Lord maintains for those who fear Him and "...spake often one to another..." Based on this verse, we might rightly conclude that fearing God and striving to maintain faithful communication with other believers go hand in hand. A person who claims to be a faithful believer, but who refuses to communicate with other believers, is a contradiction of major proportions. Contextually, this book of remembrance logically refers to special blessings that the Lord reserves for His faithful children. When you do what the Lord commands, what is right and gracious, you never need wonder if the Lord takes note. This verse assures us that the Lord knows and regards every such action that we take. We sometimes sing a hymn, "Does Jesus Care?" And this passage affirms that He both knows and cares. It relates to the Lord's personal blessings on His faithful children in the here and now, not on who goes to heaven when they die and who does not go there. This point raises the obvious question relative to our study verse. Any book, any special "Memory" that the Lord holds regarding His children, for time or for eternity, would logically be referred to as the "...book of life." Which aspect of this divine memory or record did the Holy Spirit through John intend in this verse? Consider the absurdity of interpreting the "...book of remembrance..." in Malachi 3:16 as referring to eternal life. You would foolishly conclude that one believer neglecting conversation with another believer jeopardizes his/her eternal standing.

As I recall, John uses "...book of life..." some six times in Revelation, and a study of these passages in context will indicate that he refers to more than one point, to more than one book. If we think of God's omniscience as one massive set of books, not unlike a comprehensive set of encyclopedias,

one or more of the individual titles, one or more of the many individual "Books," could logically be described as the "...book of life...." "Book of Life: Eternal" and "Book of Life: Time" might be samples of logical titles in such an encyclopedic set of God's special "Memory" regarding His children.

To the context of our study verse. Both the reference to the "...book of life" and white clothing seem indicative of temporal blessings in this context. Add to these terms "*I will confess his name before my Father....*" If we examine two passages where Jesus used a similar term (Matthew 10:32-33; Luke 12:8-9), the evidence for a temporal blessing grows. When a highly respected soldier or leader was to be honored in ancient Rome, he put on special clothes and was honored in a public parade or other display that celebrated his success. Such a special honor to the Lord's faithful children may well be the point of this verse.

The whole issue of this verse and of these terms is not that God bows before any of us, but rather that He graciously honors and acknowledges His faithful children for their steadfast faith under trials. The Sardis Church faced intense persecution for its faith. As the members of this church struggled with these trials, they might understandably wonder if the Lord knew about their troubles, and if He cared. When you put such a statement in writing, it seems rather absurd, for we know from Scripture that the Lord's love and kind care of His people is sure (Hebrews 13:5-6, as one of many such Scriptures), but trials can push the most faithful of believers over the edge into emotional reactions rather than faith reactions to difficulties. Thus in context, this verse serves as a powerful assurance to the suffering Sardis believers that the Lord would not forget, neglect, or ignore their intense trials. He would honor their faithfulness just as He promised throughout Scripture.

I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. This thought overflows with rich blessings. The Sardis believers who received this promise were overcomers. They faced the fires of persecution and of their own faith struggles with godly courage and grace. They refused to waver. Such a lifestyle required them to "Confess" the Lord Jesus at times before wicked people, before scoffers and mockers, before doubting weak believers and before persecuting pagans. But do not leave the thought here. Consider the other side of the point. Where does Jesus confess such faithful believers? His confession of them is heard by the Father and by the angels in heaven. No contrast could be greater. No audience more different. The Father faithfully sends His blessings. At the Father's command, the angels descend to minister to those struggling saints and to encourage them in their faith-walk. The believer's confession opens the door to ridicule and scoffing, even in the case of the Sardis Christians to the threat of death. Jesus' confession before the Father and angels in heaven opens the door to heavenly blessings.

When I read many of the contemporary commentaries on Revelation, I often conclude that I'm reading a fanciful novel, not a serious, scholarly, much less spiritual study of an inspired book of the Bible. Sensationalism seems to control more of the ideas than serious contemplation of God, or of either the writer or the first century readers of this book. Suppose Revelation did describe events that might occur near the end of time. What comfort would persecuted Christians at Sardis or the other cities mentioned receive from such speculative, fanciful ideas? How would such remote speculation relieve them through the present intense trials for their faith? Any interpretation of Revelation that does not anchor its meaning and spiritual value primarily to the book's first recipients and first readers should be categorically rejected as errant.

In contrast to a fanciful, complicated scheme of ideas that would not materialize for centuries, Revelation, our study verse included, contains a message of immediate relevance and edification to the churches and to the individual believers who first read or heard these words read to them. For that matter, John himself needed the immediate encouragement of these words no less than the people to whom he wrote. He was isolated on a forsaken prison island for his faith with little or no personal connection with any other believer. From the first verse of the Book, we get the sense that the Lord spoke these words as much to John as to those seven churches.

We thus have two major needs of the moment that should control and guide our interpretation of any passage in the Book of Revelation, John's and his first recipients' needs. In comparison to a dominant culture of wicked pagans, a small segment of society stood apart from the culture and marched to a different drumbeat. How could such a small group, most of them slaves and lower class citizens, have any hope of surviving against focused, intense persecution from the Roman government, and the many people in their local communities who were rebuked by their godly lives and message? Only divine intervention, a supernatural preservation, could give them hope. And that is the true message of Revelation, whether read by those first century believers or by you and me today. When you read Revelation, don't try to mystify the various images of beasts and powers that defy comprehension. Look through those images to the God whose power and gracious words repeatedly shout His promises of care and keeping for His beloved faithful followers. Trials shall abound, but God is greater, and He shall prevail in the end. That is Revelation's message.

If you had lived in first century Sardis and had been a part of that little church, think of how the words of our study verse would have impacted you. After years of constant attack and ridicule from the world around you, the Lord reminds you that He is faithful to "...confess..." you before the Father and His angels. What joyful encouragement!

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor