

Letter To Sardis

A Dying Church, Already Dead

“And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. 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 3:1-6)

How would you describe a dying church? Would it surprise you if a church that was popular and seemed to be thriving could actually be on the brink of death? That is exactly how Jesus describes the church at Sardis.

In this letter, Jesus describes Himself as the all-knowing God Who is actively involved in all His churches (the seven Spirits and seven stars). He knows not just what the world sees but the very heart of every member of a church. He knows the true story of what is happening at the Church at Sardis. To the world, they appear thriving and active (*thou hast a name and thou livest*) but He knows they are in fact dying (*art dead*). In fact, He says they are already dead.

There is no compliment for this church. They are in a desperate situation and seem to be denying it. What good exists is tiny and fleeting. Jesus tells them to find the things that are good and strengthen them. By contrast, it is inferred that they are to stop doing all the other things they are doing. His warning is that He will come. He does not say what He will do but it is like a parent saying, “Don’t make me come in there!” It will not be a pleasant experience for anyone.

Jesus tells them the key to repentance is to remember HOW they received and heard. It is important to remember *what* you have received and heard from God¹ but HOW you received it will fully explain what doctrine you have received. The people and churches of God do not receive blessings by the means of men or worldly inventions. They receive it by grace. Therefore, they should return to the teaching that God is sovereign and salvation is by grace plus nothing.

Jesus once again shows that He can divide the innocent from the guilty. Those walking uprightly will not be caught up in the judgment of Jesus when He comes. He tells some that their righteous walk will be honored (*clothed in white raiment*) and Jesus will continue to have fellowship with them (*walk with me in white*). This infers that, when He comes, He will sever fellowship with those who prefer the things and doctrines of men rather than adoring His sovereign mercy.

¹ Jude 1:3 “earnestly contend for the faith once delivered...”

The Lamb's Book of Life is a sealed book that includes names written before the foundation of the world. When it is opened by Jesus, there is no record in Scripture of Him blotting out any of those names. There are abundant scriptures to prove that none of those given to Christ in election will ever be lost and Jesus said that He will not cast them out in any way.

Therefore, this book of life must be something else. It seems that this is a timely record of behavior and fellowship. Where the Lamb's Book of Life was a record of sonship or relationship, this book is a discipline record of how Christ fellowships with His disciples. A person that continues in the doctrines of grace in purity will be confessing the full power of God. He will therefore be honored by Christ with a closer fellowship. Those who deny the finished work of Jesus endanger themselves with Christ denying fellowship to them.

The book of life is a phrase found in several places in Scripture. But they are not all the same book. The most famous is what is commonly called *The Lamb's Book of Life*. This particular book of life is mentioned several places in Scripture:

“And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life.” (Philippians 4:3)

“And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” (Revelation 13:8)

“The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.” (Revelation 17:8)

“And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.” (Revelation 20:15)

“And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.” (Revelation 21:27)

These references refer to a specific owner, the Lamb (Who is Jesus) or mention those whose names were either written or not written in the book. There is no mention here of blotting out of name that was once written. These references, no doubt, refer to the list of the names of the elect family of God which were chosen before the world began and given to Jesus in the covenant of election.² It is impossible for

² Ephesians 1:3-7

those given to Christ to ever be lost and He plainly tells us that He will in “no wise cast them out.”³ If he will not cast them out, then it is certain He will not blot of them out of His book either.

The “book of life” referred to at Sardis does not mention that the Lamb is the owner. This book also has the possibility of names being blotted out. Given these two facts, we must conclude that this is a different book altogether. Elder Joseph Holder concludes:

“Absent a specific definition, we must presume that the original audience knew the intent of this term without it being separately defined.”⁴

To a Jew, this book would be very similar to the registries kept in the Temple. Those registries were used to determine who had rights or privileges in the Temple and among the children of Israel. Those records were destroyed in 70 A.D. but the same understanding would apply to the New Testament Church. Those who are inobedient fellowship with Christ (their name is in the book) and they are blessed by Christ in the Church. Likewise, Gentiles whose names were recorded in the book of Roman citizens understood this meant they had special privileges in the Roman kingdom. This would harmonize with the blessings made to the other churches as well. Obedient perseverance brings the blessings of God here in time in the Church.

There is a similar book of life mentioned in Exodus:

“And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses said unto the people, Ye have sinned a great sin: and now I will go up unto the Lord; peradventure I shall make an atonement for your sin. And Moses returned unto the Lord, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written. And the Lord said unto Moses, Whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book.” (Exodus 32:30-33)

Paul tells us plainly that we have all sinned and come short.⁵ Does this mean that everyone’s name will be blotted out and not get to go to heaven? No, eternal salvation is by free grace alone, not by grace and our perseverance in good works. This book in Exodus seems to also be a book of fellowship or blessing. God is pleased to bless and fellowship with those who are obedient now in the church.

³ John 6:38-40

⁴ Holder, Joseph R. *Revelation: Images of Redemptive History*. Lexington, Kentucky: Sovereign Grace Publications, 2004. Print. p. 143.

⁵ Romans 3:23

There are also multiple references to names being blotted out of books of remembrance in the Old Testament.⁶ These instances are in harmony with what Jesus taught in regard to our discipleship and blessing of obedience here in when He said:

“Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven.”

The key to rightly dividing the word of truth in God’s word is to interpret the more difficult passages with those that are easier to understand and explain. It is also important to remember that the rest of the Bible plainly teaches that eternal salvation is by grace alone, plus nothing. God would not confuse us by suddenly switching to a system that required our perfect obedience in order to go to heaven. The references to promised blessing that are conditioned on our obedience always refer to blessings in time or what is commonly called timely salvation.

With that in mind, we will find this book of life mentioned again at the end of Revelation.

“and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.” (Revelation 20:19)

Referring to this text, Elder Vernon Johnson wrote:

“God’s children are not in danger of losing their eternal life. They are, however, in danger of losing the joy of their salvation, and the blessings of service to God, and the felt presence and fellowship of God and his people in the worship and service of God. They are in danger of losing their place in the Lord’s church kingdom here in time.”⁷

The letter to the Church at Sardis serves as a staunch warning to all churches who would choose to follow the doctrines and traditions of man rather than the word of God in worship doctrine and practice. A church in this condition make look alive on the outside but Jesus says it is a dead church. We would do well to remember that to truly enjoy the fellowship of God in our churches and receive His blessing, we should honor the Son in His full and SOVEREIGN glory.

⁶ Deuteronomy 9:14; 25:19-20; 2nd Kings 14:27; Psalm 69:28; 109:13-14

⁷ "Notes on the Book of Revelation." *Notes on the Book of Revelation*. Web.