

Supplementary Notes: Rev 3:5

The Question of our Name Being Erased From the Book of Life

The Problem Stated

Rev 3:5 records a statement from Christ to the church in Sardis that *could imply* that one can be a Christian yet fail to go to heaven: "he who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life" What does this mean "I will not erase his name from the book of life"? Is it possible to have one's name erased and thus forfeit heaven? How does this affect the doctrine of eternal security?

What Is The Book of Life?

This phrase is used several times in the Book of Revelation (13:8; 17:8; 20:12,15; and 21:27). According to 20:15, anyone whose name is not in the *book of life* is cast into hell. According to 21:27, only those whose names are recorded in the Lamb's book of life are allowed to enter the eternal city. Assuming that the book of life means the same thing in each of the occurrences used (a reasonable assumption), then it seems safe to conclude that the book of life is a record of those who have eternal life in Christ. Thus, it is a record which affects where one spends eternity.

Resolution of the Problem

At first glance, this verse in Rev 3:5 does seem to threaten the doctrine of eternal security ["eternal security" assures us that once we have truly placed our trust in Christ for salvation, we shall never be lost; this doctrine is built on such verses as Jn 10:27-29 in which Christ promises that His sheep shall never perish]. Is Rev 3:5 suggesting that there is some sort of "exception" to having eternal life? Is there something a believer could do that would jeopardize his name being in the book of life (and thereby lose eternal life)? A few observations are in order.

1. Notice what the text does not say. There is no mention that anyone's name is or will be erased from the book of life. Christ promises that their name will not be erased from the book of life. This is just as much a support for the doctrine of eternal security as a questioning of it. In the context, this is an encouraging promise for those who are faithful (the one who "overcomes").
2. When we look at the context to see what sin might be in view, we can see that it is not willful abandonment of Christ or absolute denial of our faith. Christ rebuked the church because their deeds were not found completed in God's sight, and they needed to wake up (vs. 2). Many of them had "soiled their garments" (vs. 4). In light of the rest of Scripture, this hardly seems to be a sin so serious that one could lose their salvation.
3. The verse in question is not an address to unfaithful Christians but rather to faithful ones, those whom John calls "those who overcome." Careful study of this theme in Revelation shows that the term "overcomer" is not a reference to all Christians but rather to ones who are faithful and standing firm (especially in the face of persecution). Thus the promise to the overcomers of not having their name erased from the book of life is really a way of affirming the honor that is going to come to them when they stand before God. Notice the phrase which immediately follows: "I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels." In other words, not only does he have the assurance that his name is forever secure in the book of life, but he has the added assurance that he is due for special honor in God's presence!

Conclusion

Rev 3:5 is not suggesting that one could lose their salvation. When taken with the following phrase, it is part of a promise for being faithful.