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Revelation #9

Written Down in the Lamb's Book of Life:

The Real Reason to Rejoice

Revelation 3:1-6

In what do you take deepest delight? What is it that brings the greatest and most intense joy and happiness to your heart? If I were to say to you, "Rejoice, because _____," how would you fill in the blank?"

I'm sure that many of us would point to our families, perhaps our children. Others might say that their greatest source of joy is their good health and good friends and a robust bank account. Of course, if Christians give much thought to the question they would eventually say something like, "My greatest source of joy is in knowing Jesus and being assured that I will spend an eternity in intimate fellowship with him." Others might point to the truth of our adoption as God's children, or our being justified or declared righteous in God's sight through faith in Jesus, and the list of answers could go on almost without end.

There was an event in the lives of the first-century followers of Jesus that brought this question very much in to play. It's found in Luke 10. There Jesus sent out 72 disciples, not apostles, but average followers like you and me. He told them to heal the sick and proclaim the presence of God's kingdom. When they returned to Jesus to give him a report of what happened, we read this:

"The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!' And he said to them, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you'" (Luke 10:17-19).

I can understand why the disciples of Jesus were so excited and filled with joy. To exercise the authority of Jesus himself in subduing demonic spirits is a wonderful thing. But then Jesus said this:

“Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20).

Jesus isn't saying it is wrong to rejoice that we have authority over demons. This is a standard way of speaking in biblical times. His point is that *compared* with having your name written down in heaven exercising authority over demons is next to nothing. So, if this is to be a reason for our great joy, what does it mean to have our names written down in heaven? That glorious reality is one of the four promises given to the faithful few in the church in first-century Sardis. We looked at the first two promised blessings last week, and today we turn our attention to the third and fourth of these promises.

The Lamb's Book of Life

The promise to those who conquer continues in Revelation 3:5, a passage that has stirred considerable discussion and controversy. “The one who conquers,” said Jesus, “will be clothed thus in white garments, and *I will never blot his name out of the book of life*. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Some are frightened by this or filled with anxiety that perhaps one day they will fail to conquer and thus have their name blotted out of the book of life. Others read it as a glorious promise of security, a solid rock of assurance, a declaration by Jesus himself that our names will *never* be deleted from God's eternal register. Let's begin our time today by trying to identify what the “book” is that Jesus mentions. There are at least five possibilities.

(1) Colin Hemer refers to one particular custom in ancient Athens according to which the names of condemned criminals were erased from civic registers before their execution. The Greek word translated “to erase” (*exaleiphein*), “was the technical term for such degradation” (148). As insightful as this may be, it is more likely that we should look for a *biblical* background to this imagery.

(2) In the OT God's “book” (or its equivalents) was *a register of the citizens of the theocratic community of Israel*. To have one's name written in the book implied the privilege of participation in the temporal blessings of the theocracy, while to be erased or blotted out of this

book meant exclusion from those blessings. In other words, this book had reference to *the rights of citizenship* for the Jewish people.

“So Moses returned to the Lord and said, ‘Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin – but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.’ But the Lord said to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book’” (Exod. 32:31-33; cf. Ps. 69:28; Isa. 4:3).

(3) The concept of a “book” was also used to portray God’s all-inclusive decree (Ps. 139:16); i.e., the very days of one’s life are ordained and written in God’s “book” before one of them occurs:

“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” (Ps. 139:16).

(4) There is also the notion of “books” of judgment in which are recorded men’s deeds. They serve as that by which or from which one shall be judged:

“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done” (Rev. 20:12; cf. Dan. 7:10).

(5) The most vivid usage, however, is the concept of the book as *the register of those who have been chosen for salvation from eternity past*. It is not temporal or earthly blessings that are in view, but participation in the eternal kingdom of God as recipients of eternal life. It would appear from these texts that not all are written in this book, but only the elect.

“Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:19-20).

“I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche, to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life” (Phil. 4:2-3).

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect” (Heb. 12:22-23).

“all who dwell on earth will worship it [i.e., the Beast], everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain” (Rev. 13:8).

“The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come” Rev. 17:8).

“But nothing unclean will ever enter it [the New Jerusalem on the New Earth], nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rev. 21:27).

If it is this fifth and final view which Jesus had in mind, and I believe it is, there are three possible interpretations.

On the one hand, Jesus may be saying that it is possible for a sinning, unrepentant Christian (such as were many at Sardis) to fail to overcome or conquer and thereby to forfeit their place in the book of life. Their names, already inscribed in the book, will be erased, signifying the loss of their salvation.

Others suggest that to have one’s name blotted out refers to something other than salvation. In Revelation 3:1 Jesus referred to the people at Sardis as having a “name” for being alive, i.e., they had a reputation for spiritual vitality. The idea, then, is that such people are saved, but will forfeit any hope of an honorable position in the coming kingdom of God. They are saved, but will experience shame at the last day. It is not the loss of life, per se, but the loss of a certain *quality* of life that otherwise could have been theirs. Thus, what one loses by having their name erased from the book of life is *eternal rewards* in the kingdom.

Several factors lead me to conclude that John does *not* envision the possibility of a true Christian forfeiting salvation. We should begin by noting that all of the other promises to the “conqueror/overcomer” are coined in positive terms with no threat (implied or explicit) of losing a salvation once gained (see 2:7,11,17,26-27; 3:12,21). This isn’t to suggest that Christians can’t backslide and sin badly. The rebukes in these seven letters indicate otherwise. Nevertheless, the evidence of the reality of true saving faith is *perseverance* (i.e., “overcoming”; cf. 1 John 2:19).

If it is asked why this promise is couched in negative terms, the answer is obvious: Jesus couldn’t say “I will write his name in the book of life” because the names of the “overcomers” (i.e., the elect) were *already* written in the book from eternity past (see Rev. 13:8; 17:8). There is no indication in Scripture, least of all in Revelation, of additional names being inscribed in the book as a reward for faithfulness or perseverance. Rather, ***faithfulness and perseverance are the evidence or fruit of having had one’s name written in the book.*** Those who worship the “beast” do so precisely because their names were *not* written in the book in eternity past (13:8; 17:8).

We need to look more closely at Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 to understand what our Lord is saying in 3:5.

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“The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.”

Note carefully that there are two and only two groups of people. On the one hand are those whose names have *not* been written in the book of life from eternity past. They “worship” and “marvel” at the Beast. The second group consists of those whose names *have been written* in the book of life, which constitutes the *reason* why they refuse to give their allegiance to the enemy of Christ. Nowhere does it suggest a third group: people whose names had been written in the book in eternity past but, because they worshiped the Beast, failed to overcome or conquer and thus have their names blotted out.

In other words, as John Piper explains, “having our name in the book of life from the foundation of the world seems to mean that God will keep you from falling and grant you to persevere in allegiance to God. Being in the book means you *will not* apostatize” (“Can the Regenerate Be Erased from the Book of Life?” 12/22/06 at www.desiringgod.org). Or again, being written in the book means that God is committed to guarding your heart so that you *will* “conquer” and “overcome” the Beast by not yielding to the temptation to worship his name or receive his mark.

Those who worship the Beast do so because their names *were not* in the book. Having one’s name written in the book from eternity past is what guarantees a life that overcomes, a life that perseveres, a faith that conquers. Piper summarizes:

“This fits with Revelation 3:5, ‘He who overcomes . . . I will not erase his name from the book of life.’ The triumph *required* in 3:5 is *guaranteed* in 13:8 and 17:8. This is not a contradiction any more than for Paul to say, ‘Work out your salvation . . . for God is at work in you to will and to do his good pleasure’ (Philippians 2:12-13). It is not nonsense to state the condition: if you conquer, God will not erase your name (3:5); *and* to state the assurance: if your name is written, you will conquer (13:8 and 17:8). God’s ‘written-down-ones’ really *must* conquer, and really *will* conquer. One side highlights our responsibility; the other highlights God’s sovereignty.”

Therefore, this declaration of Jesus is a promise to the elect that nothing will ever, by any means (he uses a double negative), prevent them from possessing the eternal inheritance to which they have been ordained. In other words, we must take note of *what Jesus does not say*. He does *not* say that anyone *will* be erased from the book of life. Rather, he says the overcomers will *not* be erased. His word is *a promise of security* to overcomers, not a threat of insecurity to those who lapse. So again, Jesus nowhere says he will erase names previously inscribed in the book of life.

What joy! What comfort! What incentive to love him and praise him and serve him. Jesus will *never* blot my name out of the book of life!

One more thing. People often ask: “What must one *do* to have his/her name written down in the Lamb’s book of life? Can someone whose name is *not now* written in the book do something, such as believe in Jesus, so that his/her name *will be* written in the book?” The answer to the first question is, nothing. The answer to the second question is, No. Names are inscribed in the book of life before the foundation of the world. This is by God’s sovereign and altogether gracious choice. You don’t believe in Jesus in order that your name will be written in the book. You believe in Jesus *because* your name has already been written down in the book. To those who do not presently believe in Jesus, we say: “Repent and believe!” If they do, it is because their names were written in the book of life before the foundation of the world.

God has not chosen to reveal to us the names written in the Lamb's book of life. It is none of our business. We are not free to speculate about it. What he *has* revealed is the responsibility of each individual to repent and believe the gospel. ***If a person does not believe the gospel, he has no one to blame but himself. If he does believe the gospel, he has no one to praise but God.***

None of us deserves to have his/her name written down in God's book. We all deserve eternal damnation. The only explanation for why a hell-deserving sinner has his/her name written down in the Lamb's book of life before the foundation of the world is because God is gracious and merciful and wishes to provide his Son with a Bride that will enjoy his glorious presence and love for eternity. Had God chosen not to inscribe anyone's name in his book, he would have done no one an injustice.

He Knows Your Name!

I'm amazed at how seemingly little things in life can have such a massive impact on other people. Take, for example, ***when someone remembers your name***. Perhaps it's a person you admire greatly, whom you've only met once before, but they instantly smile when they see your face and say, "Hey, Susie, how are you? It's good to see you again." You feel affirmed and honored that someone who is well-known and successful actually knows who you are. Maybe that's because it strokes your ego and awakens personal pride. Whatever the case, no one can deny how good it feels.

Or consider the converse, when you find yourself in the presence of a person who has either forgotten your name or, for whatever reason, has little desire to be seen with you. We've all been in these situations (at least I have!) and they are undeniably painful. You get the distinct impression that you're an embarrassment to them. When someone walks up they pretend to be occupied with other matters, perhaps even turning their back on you. The discomfort is almost tangible. If pressed about who you are, they quickly divert the focus of the conversation to something less threatening.

It's precisely this sort of relational phenomenon that makes the words of Jesus in Revelation 3:5 so powerful and so glorious. Here we find the fourth and final promise to the faithful in Sardis. He's already assured them they will "walk" with him "in white," that they will "be clothed in white garments," and that he will never, by no means ever, blot their names out of the book of life. To these Jesus adds: ***"I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels"*** (Rev. 3:5b).

Revelation 3:5 actually appears to be a combination of two statements found on the lips of Jesus in the gospels. In Matthew 10:32 he declared, “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge *before my Father* who is in heaven.” Again, in Luke 12:8, we read, “And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge *before the angels* of God.” Let’s unpack this remarkable promise with several observations.

First, ***this is no grudging concession on the part of Jesus, but a joyful and heartfelt proclamation*** to the Father and the myriads of angelic beings: “He’s mine! She belongs to me! They are worthy!” The words “acknowledge” or “confess” often suggest a reluctant admission on the part of the person speaking, less a willing declaration than a concession to the unavoidable.

That’s not what Jesus has in mind when he uses these words! ***These names are on his lips because they are first in his heart.*** Jesus isn’t embarrassed by those whom he confesses before the Father. He doesn’t worry what the angels might think that he would dare speak your name or mine in their presence.

We all know what it’s like to feel embarrassed to be in someone’s company, fearful they might bring reproach on us or cost us standing in the sight of our peers (I’m not suggesting that’s a good thing). Whatever the reasons that make us hesitant to be seen with them, it happens. Not Jesus! He “is not ashamed” (Heb. 2:11) to call us brethren. He rejoices that we are his and he happily speaks each name with delight and satisfaction.

A second thing to note is that Jesus evidently will speak each of our names ***individually***. Yes, we are the *body* of Christ, the *church*, the *Bride* whom he loves with an everlasting love. Our *corporate* identity as the people of God is an indescribable blessing. But according to Revelation 3:5 Jesus says, “I will confess *his name* [singular]”, not merely “their name” before the Father and the angels. People on earth may forget your name or feel uneasy in your presence or reluctantly concede your accomplishments. But Jesus knows your name and will say to the Father, “This is Steve. He is righteous in me. Father, this is Mary. She is mine!”

How does one put into words the thrill and life-giving power of *hearing Jesus speak your name*? Mary Magdalene has been much in the news of late, especially with the publication a few years ago of Dan Brown’s book and then the movie by the same title, *The Da Vinci Code*. If she were present today I hardly think she would care that everyone knew her name, and certainly not for *that* reason. But there was one occasion when it meant more than all the world to her.

Following the resurrection of Jesus, she stood outside the tomb, weeping. Turning around, she “saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘**Mary**’ (!). She turned and said to him in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher)” (John 20:14b-16).

Do you know the difference between being called “Woman” and being called “Mary”? One lady did! This woman, at one time indwelt and tormented by seven demons (Luke 8:2), filled with shame and reproach, hears the sweetest and most comforting word imaginable, her name: “Mary!” But it wasn’t the name so much as the *man* on whose lips it was willfully, happily, and confidently found: Jesus! “**He** knows my name! **He** remembers me! I’m not an embarrassment to **him**. **He’s** not ashamed of me!”

This is what each of us who knows him will experience one day, without reservation or qualification. He will speak *your* name and *my* name before his Father and the angels.

But this is more than merely hearing your name called as if a teacher is taking roll. This is no perfunctory ritual as Jesus reels off one name after another, to which you respond, “Here,” “Yo!” or “Present”. This is an open, glad-hearted, public acknowledgment, an *owning* by Jesus of you and me. “Father, these are the ones you gave me out of all flesh (John 17:2). I declare them to you now. I proclaim their names as those who have come to faith and have rested in what I’ve done alone, without looking to another lover, another savior, or another god.”

Third, could it be that Jesus speaks our names as *he reads them from the book of life*? In view of the immediately preceding context (Rev. 3:5a), we can’t dismiss the possibility that the names he speaks, one after another, were those who had been written down in that glorious volume from before the foundation of the world (cf. Rev. 13:8; 17:8).

But won’t Satan be present to object, to bring up every sin and failure and fault, reminding God and the angels of how often we fell short, repented, only then to fall short again? Well, I’m not sure Satan will be present on that day, but if he were, let your fears be put to rest, for “who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Romans 8:33-34).

Fourth, there may well be a legal or forensic dimension to this declaration by Jesus of the names of those in the book of life. This isn't at all to diminish the personal and relational reality of what will occur, but only to emphasize that this is our *final vindication* from all charges; it is Christ's declaration that we are righteous through faith in him alone. It is, in a word, our ultimate and eternal "justification"!

Fifth, and finally, given the context of both the two references in the gospels where this statement is found (see above on Matt. 10:32 and Luke 12:8) and the situation envisioned among the churches in Asia Minor, it may be that the emphasis is on "confessing the name" of the Christian who has bravely confessed the name of Christ *in the face of persecution*. His confessing our name comes only after we, by the grace of God, have confessed his name to an unbelieving world, willing to endure whatever negative consequences that might bring (cf. Matt. 10:33; Luke 12:9).

Envision the scene. You are standing in the blazing presence of the immeasurable and unfathomable God, an all-consuming fire, the God of infinite and unending glory, the God of unsearchable and incomparable righteousness. Small, frail, weak as you are, Jesus takes hold of your hand and leads you "before" his Father and beneath the penetrating gaze of myriads of angels. Then he proudly and happily and joyfully and confidently declares: "Father, Sam is mine! I am his! He is clothed in white! I've paid his debt. I suffered his penalty. He is clean. He is pure. He is in me and I am in him. Sam is righteous!"

He knows my name! And if you *know* his, he also knows yours!