

# The Word of Righteousness

## The Overcomers in the Seven Churches (10)

The fifth epistle to the churches in Revelation is to the church in Sardis (3:1-6), which is a prophetic sign of Protestantism, the reformed church from the time of the Reformation to the second coming of Christ. The principle revealed by the condition and work of Sardis is that of the progressive recovery of the church. Following centuries of degradation, loss, and damage suffered by the church, the Reformation was a great step in the return to a state of normalcy, health, strength, and purity, reviving and restoring precious truths and experiences that were given to the church by the Lord at the time of the apostles. As Philip Schaff states, the Reformation “removed the rubbish of human traditions and reopened the pure fountain of the gospel of Christ” (13).

However, the Lord’s word to Sardis contains a strong rebuke. W. Robertson Nicoll writes, “Sardis and Laodicea, which apparently were the only members of this group untroubled by outside persecution or inward error, were the least satisfactory of all the seven,” adding that the message to Sardis is the “most vehement of the seven” (364-365). Henry Alford notes that the spirit of this epistle is “one of rebuke and solemn denunciation” (4: 579). Archibald Thomas Robertson concurs: “Along with Laodicea it was blamed most of all the seven churches” (313). This strongly indicates that even in Sardis—the recovered church of the Reformation—the perfecting and refining Christ sees the possibility, and the undeniable history, of coming short of a full recovery of the truth, life, and experience of the church.

### The Meaning of *Life* in the Scriptures

In Revelation 3:1 and 2 Christ speaks to the church in Sardis, saying,

These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: I know your works, that you have a name that you are living, and yet you are dead. Become watchful and establish the things which remain, which were about to die; for I have found none of your works completed before My God.

The crucial significance of the Lord’s rebuke to the reformed church is found in the word *living* (in Greek ζῶω; related to *life*, ζωή). In contrast are the words *dead*

and *about to die*. The New Testament uses three primary words for *life*. *Bios* (βίος) refers to the course, means, manner, and duration of one’s human life with respect to its physical and material existence (Luke 8:14; 1 Tim. 2:2; 2 Tim. 2:4; 1 John 2:16). *Psuche* (ψυχή) denotes the life that animates the body, that is, the natural psychological life, the soul, the seat of personality, composed of the rational mind, sensible emotions, and active will (Matt. 6:25; 16:25-26; Luke 9:56; 1 John 3:16; Rev. 12:11). In God’s economy, however, *zoe* (ζωή) is the most crucial of the three words for *life* as well as the most mysterious and most inadequately understood. *Zoe* refers to the divine, eternal, and uncreated life of God, that is, God Himself. C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine speak aptly of this life:

*Zoe*...is used in [the New Testament] of life as a principle, life in the absolute sense, life as God has it, that which the Father has in Himself, and which He gave to the Incarnate Son to have in Himself...and which the Son manifested in the world...From this life man has become alienated in consequence of the Fall,...and of this life men become partakers through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,...Who is therefore said to be “the life” of the believer. (324-325)

John 10:10 and 11 exemplify the two higher lives. There Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life [ζωή] and may have it abundantly. I am the good Shepherd; the good Shepherd lays down His life [ψυχή] for the sheep.” Witness Lee writes,

As a man, the Lord has the psuche life, the human life, and as God, He has the zoe life, the divine life. He laid down His soul, His psuche life, His human life, to accomplish redemption for His sheep (v. 15, 17-18) that they may share His zoe life, His divine life (v. 10b), the eternal life (v. 28), by which they can be formed into one flock under Himself as the one Shepherd. (Recovery Version, v. 11, note 1)

John 5:26 tells us that the Father has life in Himself, referring to His intrinsic being in and from eternity. Thus, many times He is called the “living God” or the “living Father” (Matt. 16:16; Acts 14:15; 1 Thes. 1:9; John 6:57). Likewise, the Father gave to the Son to have life in Himself (5:26). Verses 1 and 4 of John 1 say of the Son, “In the beginning was the Word...In Him was life.” (Subsequent

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occurrences of *life* in scriptural quotations are all instances of Greek ζωή.) Jesus plainly identified Himself as this uncreated, eternal life, proclaiming, “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25) and, “I am the way and the reality and the life” (14:6). John wrote concerning Christ as the eternal Word,

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life (and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and report to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us). (1 John 1:1-2)

**H**ere, *Word of life*, *life*, and *eternal life* are all synonymous, denoting the Son, who was with the Father and manifested to the disciples. Thus, the Son is the Author of life (Acts 3:15), and like the Father, He also is “living” (Luke 24:5; 1 Pet. 2:4). In addition, Romans 8:2 speaks of “the Spirit of life,” indicating that the Spirit Himself is life. From all the foregoing, we conclude that life in its highest sense, denoted by the word ζωή, is the inward and intrinsic essence of the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. God the Father is life, and He gives life to the dead (John 5:21; Rom. 4:17). Christ the Son is life, and He gives life to whom He wills (John 5:21; 10:28; 17:2; 1 Cor. 15:22). God the Spirit is life, and He imparts life to those who receive Him (John 6:63; 1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:6). For the Divine Trinity to give life is for Him to give His own essential being by means of a living, organic impartation.

### The Three Lives and the Three Parts of Man

The three Greek words for *life* correspond to the parts of the tripartite man. *Bios* corresponds to man’s body, possessing world-consciousness, with which he contacts the physical world. *Psuche* corresponds to the life of man’s soul, possessing self-consciousness, by which he deals with the psychological realm. *Zoe* corresponds to the regenerated believer’s human spirit, his deepest part, which possesses God-consciousness and by which he contacts and receives God, who is Spirit (Luke 1:46-47; Heb. 4:12; Zech. 12:1; Job 32:8; Prov. 20:27; John 4:24; Rom. 8:16; 1:9; 1 Cor. 14:14-16; 16:18; 2 Cor. 7:13). These three parts are distinguished in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, which says, “The God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly, and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Alford comments,

Τὸ πνεῦμα is the SPIRIT, the highest and distinctive part of man... ἡ ψυχή is the lower or animal soul, containing the passions and desires,... which we have in common with the brutes, but which in us is ennobled and drawn up by the πνεῦμα. That St. Paul had these distinctions in mind, is plain... from such places as 1 Cor. ii. 14. (3: 282)

Mary E. McDonough says likewise,

The terms “inner man” and “outer man,” or their equivalents, are employed in modern psychology, but the psychology of the Bible is more analytical inasmuch as it indicates a subdivision of the invisible part of man, thus teaching us that man is not dichotomous but is a trichotomous being. We find this plainly taught in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and indicated in Hebrews 4:12 and Luke 1:46-47... Do not say “soul” when “spirit” is meant and *vice versa*... It is lamentably true that the failure to give this subject the study that it deserves has resulted in much that is “soulish” being regarded as “spiritual.” (16-17)

**G**od’s economy is centered on our regenerated spirit, where Christ as the divine *zoe* dwells. By our natural birth we received *bios*, the life of the mortal body, and *psuche*, the life of our soul, which together the Bible calls our outer man (2 Cor. 4:16) and our old man (Rom. 6:6; Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9). Since the time of the fall, God’s enemy indwells man’s corrupted body, the flesh (Gen. 6:3), as the personified sin mentioned in Romans 7:17 through 20. Moreover, he invaded man’s soul, causing man’s mind to be vanity, his understanding to be darkened, and his heart to be hardened (Eph. 4:17-18). In Matthew 16:22 Peter rebuked the Lord because his mind was set on the things of men, not on the things of God. Jesus, discerning the life in Peter’s natural mind, his *psuche*, said to him, “Get behind Me, Satan!” (v. 23). This indicates that the Lord regards not the words and deeds of His disciples but the life that is the source of the words and deeds. *Psuche* is man’s soulish life, corrupted by the evil life of Satan. As believers, therefore, not discerning our soul from our spirit and regarding that which is soulish as spiritual are to miss the mark of God’s economy in our spirit. It is, like Sardis, to have a name that we are living and yet be in a condition of death.

### The Meaning of *Living* in the Scriptures

The discerning Christ speaks to the church in Sardis, “You have a name that you are living, and yet you are dead” (Rev. 3:1). *Living* (ζῆς, “you live”) is the verbal form of *life* (ζωή). To be living, in the highest sense, is to possess *zoe*, the life of God, to contact and nurture this life, and to live, walk, work, and have our being in this life. God is the God of the living (Matt. 22:32), and Christ died and lived again so that He might be the Lord of the living (Rom. 14:9). We, the believers, who were appointed to eternal life (Acts 13:48), initially become living through regeneration, by which we receive the divine life into our innermost being, causing our spirit to be born anew, that is, to be born of the Spirit, who is life (John 3:3, 5-6). As a result, we pass out of death into life (5:24) and now have life; that is, we possess the divine life as a new organic essence that is added to our being. Thus, “he who believes into the Son has eternal life” (3:36); “believing, you may have life in His name”

(20:31); and, “he who has the Son has the life” (1 John 5:12). Christ’s life becomes our life through His living indwelling. For this reason Paul can say, “Your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). From the time of our regeneration, Christ has become “our life” (v. 4), causing us to be living.

**T**he New Testament believers have turned to the living God (Acts 14:15), are sons of the living God (Rom. 9:26), serve the living God (1 Thes. 1:9; Heb. 9:14), set our living hope on the living God (1 Pet. 1:3; 1 Tim. 4:10), and pursue the course of our Christian life in a new and living way (Heb. 10:20). This causes us to be living. Now, as living stones, we are being built up as a spiritual house, which is the church (1 Pet. 2:5). In 1 Timothy 3:15 Paul says, “I write that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God.” Lee writes,

The living God, who lives in the church, must be subjective to the church rather than objective. The idol in the heathen temple is lifeless. The God who not only lives but also acts, moves, and works in His living temple, the church, is living. Because He is living, the church too is living in Him, by Him, and with Him. A living God and a living church live, move, and work together. (Recovery Version, v. 15, note 3)

Because the initiation of our participation in the divine life is in our spirit, Paul says that our spirit itself—our human spirit indwelt by and mingled with the divine Spirit—is life (Rom. 8:10). Paul also says, “The mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the spirit is life and peace” (v. 6). If our mind is set on the flesh, like Peter’s when he rebuked the Lord, the result is death, but if our mind is set on the spirit, our outward actions are in agreement with our inner man, where Christ’s indwelling life is. As a result, our mind, the leading part of our psuche, is infused with life. The life in our spirit flows out into our mind, causing our soul to be renewed and transformed (Eph. 4:23; 2 Cor. 3:18). In this way even our soul becomes living, that is, saturated with and dominated by zoe. Eventually, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to our mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells us (Rom. 8:11). For this cause we need to receive the life that is ministered to us through the word of life and allow it to operate in us (Acts 5:20; Phil. 2:16; 2 Cor. 4:12). We must love life (1 Pet. 3:10), walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4), and lay hold on that which is really life (1 Tim. 6:12, 19). This process must continue until the day that all death in us is swallowed up by life (2 Cor. 5:4). This is the way to have life

abundantly (John 10:10) and become truly living in our entire tripartite being—spirit, soul, and body.

### The Seven Spirits and the Seven Stars

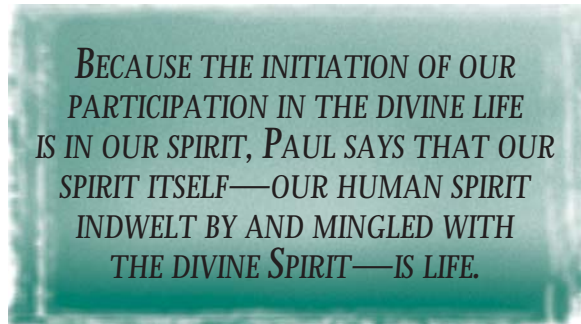
In Revelation 3:1 Christ presents Himself to the church in Sardis as “He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars.” Christ comes explicitly with the seven Spirits only to Sardis, which is a church in the condition of death. The seven Spirits are introduced in 1:4 and 5, which say, “Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is coming, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ.” This greeting is unique among those of all the books of the New Testament. The characteristic greeting that opens each of the Epistles is a blessing from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:3; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; 2 Pet. 1:2; 2 John 3). Only Revelation opens with a blessing from the three of the Trinity. Moreover, the Spirit here is not onefold but sevenfold, indicating an intensification in the Spirit’s function and work in God’s operation. In addition, the Spirit is mentioned second, and the Son, third. This too is unique to Revelation, revealing the importance of the intensified function of the sevenfold Spirit of God.

Verse 5 of chapter 4 says, “Out of the throne come forth lightnings and voices and thunders. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.” The seven lamps signify the enlightening and searching of the sevenfold intensified Spirit in His function for God’s judgment, including His examination of the needy, degrading churches. In chapter 5, verse 6 says,

In the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures and in the midst of the elders a Lamb standing as having just been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.

The seven eyes of the Lamb are for observing and searching in order to execute God’s judgment for the fulfillment of His purpose. The seven Spirits as the seven eyes of the Lamb run to and fro on the whole earth (Zech. 3:9; 4:10) in order to transfuse and infuse all that God is into His chosen people, imparting the divine life into them for the building up of God’s eternal habitation.

**T**he feeling of Revelation 2 and 3, with its admonitions and rebukes, attests to this book being written during the time of the church’s degradation, when the life-giving function of the Spirit was desperately needed. In Acts the Spirit operated through the disciples for the propagation



of the resurrected Christ to produce the churches. In the Epistles the Spirit indwells the believers to enliven, sanctify, and transform them, issuing in their many functions for the building up of the churches as the Body of Christ. In Revelation the Spirit speaks words of admonition to the degrading churches (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), indicating that in the darkness of the church's degradation the Spirit is vitally important. The sevenfold function and work of the Spirit are not spoken of prior to Revelation. By the time of the writing of this book, the churches had begun to decline, and the age of the church was darkening; thus, the Spirit became intensified sevenfold in order to counteract the church's degradation. According to 3:1, the church in Sardis in particular—signifying reformed Protestantism—is in desperate need of the life-giving function of the seven Spirits. In the degradation of the church, the Spirit of God is intensified sevenfold, not mainly in power or in works but in the impartation of life, in order to vitalize the churches and the believers with the overcoming, death-conquering zoe.

Verse 1 speaks also of the seven stars, who are the messengers of the seven churches (1:20). *Messenger* (ἄγγελος) denotes an “envoy, one who is sent” (Thayer 5), “a guardian or representative” (Vine 26). Joseph A. Seiss writes,

They are *stars* because they are illuminators, and because they are heads and leaders of the flocks over which the Holy Ghost hath placed them. They are *angels* or messengers, because God hath sent them, and made them his representatives, the guardians of his Churches, and the stewards of his mysteries...Nor is it only *bishops*, in the modern sense of that term, as some have argued...They are *overseers* indeed. (52)

**I**n Revelation the Lord requires shining stars, luminaries in the dark night. The Protestant churches inherited and adapted the hierarchical clergy system from the Roman Catholic Church with only minor and technical changes. The titles *vicar*, *rector*, *curate*, *priest*, *pastor* (of several kinds), *reverend*, *dean*, *provost*, *bishop*, *archbishop*, and *primate* are still found in Protestantism. In Revelation, however, the leading ones in the churches are called by neither of the titles given them in the preceding New Testament books—*elders* (πρεσβύτερος; Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 5:17) and *overseers* (ἐπίσκοπος; Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2)—indicating that what the Lord needs is a living reality, not mere titles. Daniel 12:3 says, “Those who have insight will shine like the shining of the heavenly expanse, and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars, forever and ever.” In response to the deadened, darkened condition of the degrading churches as unveiled in Revelation 2 and 3, the leading ones who are needed are bright, shining luminaries, who apart from all official titles shine with the light of life. By appearing

to the church in Sardis as the One who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, Christ exhorts the dying church to become intensely living and intensely shining.

### Walking with the Lord in White Garments

The speaking Spirit says to Sardis, “You have a few names in Sardis who have not defiled their garments, and they will walk with Me in white because they are worthy. He who overcomes will be clothed thus, in white garments” (3:4-5). In the Bible garments signify what we are in our walk and living, and white signifies purity and approvedness. The Greek word here for *defile* (μολύνω) is used in the New Testament symbolically and figuratively. Alford represents the common view that those referred to here are they “who have not sullied the purity of their Christian life by falling into sin” (4: 581). Because the emphasis of Protestantism is on sin, forgiveness of sins, holiness, and outward sanctification, the defilement of garments referred to here is almost universally taken to mean the stains of sin. According to the context and theme of this epistle, however, to defile our garments is to have a walk and a living that are stained not with sin, strictly speaking, but with death. The Lord lays no charge of sin against the church in Sardis, as He does against Thyatira. The nature of this church is different. His diagnosis of Sardis is that those in it are spiritually dead. It is not sin and righteousness that He is dealing with; it is death and life. In God's eyes nothing is more defiling and abominable than death, and nothing is more precious than life. Man's primeval sin in Genesis was partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which issued in death (2:17; 3:3). The deadening of his spirit led ultimately to the death of his entire being (Eph. 2:1).

**T**he offerings at the altar of burnt offering in Leviticus reveal, in type, the Lord's attitude toward sin and death. When a person sinned, he could bring his trespass offering to Jehovah and be forgiven immediately (5:6). Verse 7 of chapter 6 says, “The priest shall make expiation for him before Jehovah, and he will be forgiven for any of the things which he may have done so as to be guilty.” Chapter 11, however, deals with another kind of defilement—that of contacting a carcass, a dead animal. Whoever touched a carcass remained unclean until the evening even after washing his clothes (vv. 24-25, 28, 31). Even household articles remained unclean if a carcass fell on them, and they needed either to be washed or broken in pieces (vv. 32-35). Touching the dead body of a human had an even greater effect, causing the one who contacted it to be unclean for seven days, and those who were not properly purified defiled the tabernacle of Jehovah and were cut off from Israel (Num. 19:11, 13). This signifies that although we are immediately forgiven after confessing our sins to the Lord (1 John 1:9), the cleansing



from spiritual death requires a longer period of time in which the indwelling divine life must operate for our restoration to fellowship with the Lord and with the church. Death, therefore, is more defiling than sin, and its stain is harder to cleanse. Death, more than sin, is God's enemy, because it is allied with the devil (Heb. 2:14-15). It is God's last enemy and will be the last item cast into the lake of fire (1 Cor. 15:26; Rev. 20:14).

According to the foregoing, uncleanness is synonymous with death. Therefore, the white garments of the overcomers in Sardis signify a walk and a living that are unspotted by death and are thus approved by the Lord. The overcomers do not contact spiritual death or tolerate its attack. Rather, they receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness to fight against death and deadness and reign in life through Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:17).

### Not Having One's Name Erased from the Book of Life

To the church in Sardis the Lord says, "He who overcomes will be clothed thus, in white garments, and I shall by no means erase his name out of the book of life" (Rev. 3:5). The book of life is a heavenly record of the redeemed in Christ (Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 20:12; 21:27). Because the redeemed receive the divine life through regeneration, this book is "of life" and not merely of selection or justification. It is not merely a book of those whose sins have been taken away by the imputation of God's righteousness through the vicarious death of Christ. It is a record of those who have received life, are regenerated by life, partake of life, and are being reconstituted by life. It follows, then, that no unbeliever is recorded here. No one who has not believed in the Lord and received Him as life can be found in this book.

Moreover, Jesus said of His disciples, "I give to them eternal life, and they shall by no means perish forever, and no one shall snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:28). No one, having been saved, can be unsaved; our salvation is secure for eternity. Believers in the church in Sardis—perhaps more than anyone else—know that it is impossible for anyone whose name is once written in the Lamb's book of life to be condemned to perdition. This assurance that they have is the great heritage of the Reformation.

### Incomplete Interpretations

Nevertheless, Revelation 3:5 strongly implies that a name, once written in the book of life, can be erased. If viewed only from the perspective of Reformation teach-

ing, this verse cannot be properly understood. As a result, the majority of the many interpretations of this verse are ambiguous and inconsistent. One attempt at interpretation is to regard the persons in the church in Sardis as unbelievers, whose names never appeared in the book of life. E. W. Bullinger does this by dismissing outright the entire book of Revelation as applying to New Testament believers, considering it an extension of the Old Testament. He states, "Its great subject is God's final dealings with the Jew and the Gentile; and not the Church of God" (5). Concerning the epistles to the seven churches, he says, "There is nothing in them about Christianity," and of the Lord's word to the church in Sardis, he writes, "This is language foreign to the Church of God" (195, 163). This view is remarkable, seeing that the apostle opens the book with, "John to the seven churches which are in Asia" (1:4), and each of the seven epistles in chapters 2 and 3 are addressed to the messenger of the respective church. Clearly, the seven epistles are written to the churches of God, despite the difficulty this makes for one's school of interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

THE LORD'S DIAGNOSIS OF SARDIS  
IS THAT THOSE IN IT ARE  
SPIRITUALLY DEAD. IT IS NOT  
SIN AND RIGHTEOUSNESS  
THAT HE IS DEALING WITH;  
IT IS DEATH AND LIFE.

Most expositors accept that the epistles to the seven churches are written to genuine New Testament churches. However, this admits the difficulty of members of an actual church having their names erased from the book of life. John F. Walvoord responds, "To some, this verse seems to indicate that a believer's name *could* be blot-

ted out, which is contrary to the Bible's clear teaching of the believer's eternal security" (80). He would be right, of course, if 3:5 refers to a believer's eternal salvation, which as we explain, it does not. An expositor of Walvoord's school must assume that the Lord's word here refers to a nominal Christian, an unbeliever in the midst of the church. However, the New Testament does not support the view that the genuine church is composed both of believers and unbelievers. No unregenerate person can be a member of a church, an actual member of the organic Body of Christ. "Assemblies of the worldly, admitting the population without credible profession of faith, are not churches in Christ's sense" (Govett 155). It is clear from verse 5 that the person whose name is erased from the book of life is one whose name once appeared there, as no unbeliever's can.

Another way to interpret *erase his name* is to admit that it refers to a genuine believer, but most who do so leave us with an incomplete or confused conclusion. R. C. H. Lenski writes,

To have one's name inscribed implies divine certification of a position and of corresponding rights with the Lord.

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To have one's name erased (ἐξολείφω) is to lose both, and never to have it inscribed is never to have them. The figure lends itself to all these ideas. (134)

Lenski correctly distinguishes between having one's name written in the book of life, having it written but then erased, and never having had it written. Concerning those whose names do appear in the book of life, he adds, "This book contains the names of all who have the true spiritual life...This is the same life (ἡ ζωή, definite, there is no other) that he has now (John 3:15, 16) by faith; but in our present state here on earth it may die out" (134). Lenski rightly tells us that the "true spiritual life" in a believer may die out, although not altogether, and in consequence he will lose certain positions and rights with the Lord. However, in the place of explaining how this is possible, Lenski simply tells us that God is not bound, so He can both enter a name and also erase it as He wishes. This certainly falls short of an adequate exposition of Revelation 3:5.

### *Losing the Enjoyment of the Divine Life in the Kingdom Age*

John Peter Lange represents the more faithful interpreters of verse 5, although his simple statement of truth also lacks a full explanation. Concerning the believer in Sardis, he writes, "His name was entered in the Book of Life simultaneously with his calling and conversion. Such names may, however, be wiped out—a destiny awaiting many in Sardis" (127). Lange's editor, E. R. Craven, adds in a footnote, "It is not *asserted* in this passage that the names of any who shall finally perish were ever entered in the Book of Life, nor is it *necessarily* implied" (127). This is the plain and ready sense of the passage. The name written in the book of life is that of a believer, because the names of any who will perish cannot appear there. Nevertheless, the "destiny awaiting many in Sardis" is to have their names erased. To have one's name erased from the book of life is not for him to lose his salvation. Rather, it is for him to lose the vital participation and practical experience of the divine life. Since all the redeemed will enjoy the blessings of the divine life in eternity (22:1-5), this loss must be only temporary, for a season or period of time. Robert Govett concludes,

I have no better solution to propose, than that there may be a temporary blotting out of the name of the believer from the book of life, during the period of reward enjoyed by the others; and a restoration of the name, ere the final award settles the position of each for ever. (171)

**T**he participation, enjoyment, and experience of the divine life by the believers are in stages. In the initial stage we are born again, that is, born of the Spirit (John 3:3, 5-6). The divine Spirit of life comes into our human spirit and mingles Himself with it, causing our spirit not

only to be living but to become life (Rom. 8:2, 10). After this, we need to daily partake of Christ as life by eating and drinking Him. In this way the divine life strengthens, enriches, and fills our inner man and spreads further into our heart (Eph. 3:16-17). As a result, we grow in life (1 Cor. 3:6); we experience the "growth of God" (Col. 2:19), that is, the increase within us of God as life, until we grow up into Christ in all things to become full-grown (Eph. 4:13, 15; Col. 1:28; Heb. 5:14). Peter calls this our growth "unto salvation" (1 Pet. 2:2), that is, our full growth in the divine life that brings us into God's full and complete salvation experientially and subjectively. At the consummation of our enjoyment of the divine life in the present age, our body will be glorified, transfigured by life, making us the same as Christ in all the parts of our being (Phil. 3:21). Such a living in the participation and enjoyment of the divine life today is what it means to walk in undefiled, white garments, as spoken of by the Lord to the church in Sardis (Rev. 3:4-5).

Those who adequately experience and enjoy the divine life in the present age will be rewarded with the full enjoyment of life in the coming age, the kingdom age of a thousand years (20:4). The New Testament refers to this as inheriting eternal life. Jesus told the disciples, "There is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not by all means receive back many times as much in this time, and in the coming age, eternal life" (Luke 18:29-30; cf. Matt. 19:29). The inheriting of eternal life takes place "in the coming age," the thousand-year manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens. This will be the enjoyment of the divine life to a full extent—as a reward to those who, in the church age, paid the price to follow the Lord and live in the present reality of the kingdom. As such, it is equivalent to inheriting the kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5). It is an inheritance not as a free gift of grace but as a "recompense" (Col. 3:24), a reward for the overcomers in God's dispensational administration.

**I**n the eternal age all the believers will enjoy and participate in the fullness of the divine, eternal life of God. They will eat of the tree of life and drink of the river of water of life as the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 22:1-2, 17). This is the final, eternal stage of the enjoyment of the divine life, which will be the common portion of all the redeemed. However, if the believers do not overcome the dead, cold, and weak condition of the degraded church in the present age but instead are contaminated by the defilement of death, they will forfeit their present, vital, and actual enjoyment of the divine life in this age and will not be allowed to enjoy the eternal life in the coming age of reward. In their practical experience they will have their names erased from the book of life during the kingdom age, although they will be fully restored in the age of eternity. If our

living today bears the testimony of being in the Lord's life without being defiled by death, our name will not be erased from the book of life during the millennium. Rather, at that time we will be clothed in the white garments in which we walk today, and the Lord will confess our name before His Father and before His angels (3:5). Watchman Nee writes,

The matter here does not involve whether the name is recorded, but whether the name will be confessed. Those whom the Lord confesses will participate in something; those whom the Lord does not confess will not participate...Here the problem is not related to eternal life in eternity, but to whether or not you can reign with the Lord. It is an unfortunate thing to be recorded and yet not be able to participate. (59)

If a believer does not practically experience and participate in the divine life and is not strengthened by the resurrection life to keep himself from deadness, his name will be erased from the book of life in the coming dispensation of the kingdom, and the Lord will deny him before God and His angels (Matt. 10:33; Luke 12:9).

### The Lord's Coming as a Thief

The coming Christ says to Sardis, "Remember therefore how you have received and heard, and keep it and repent. If therefore you will not watch, I will come as a thief, and you shall by no means know at what hour I will come upon you" (Rev. 3:3). This refers to the Lord's second coming at the end of the church age. Like the word in verse 5, this word also must be seen as a warning to the genuine believers of the Lord. Gordon D. Fee writes, "In the case of the believers in Sardis, they appear to have lost touch with reality. No longer are they looking forward with eagerness to Christ's coming, but they are now 'coasting,' feeling secure and impregnable, and are no longer watchful" (48). In Matthew 24 Jesus told His disciples,

Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord comes. But know this, that if the householder had known in what watch the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you also be ready, because at an hour when you do not expect it, the Son of Man is coming. (vv. 42-44)

Christ's coming back is a warning, an encouragement, and an incentive to the church in Sardis. The Lord's word in Revelation 3:3 indicates that readiness for His coming is

conditioned on the believers' watchfulness and their attending carefully to the things that they received and heard. This is a strong indication that a certain aspect of being raptured into the Lord's presence to meet Him with joy will not be the common portion of all those in Sardis. The coming of Christ at the end of the church age will be in two aspects—His secret coming prior to the great tribulation and His open coming near the end of those three and a half years.<sup>2</sup> The day and hour of the former is kept secret; it will transpire suddenly, and no one will know its time beforehand. This is Christ's secret coming to steal away the vital, mature, and overcoming saints, who will be to Him as precious goods are to a thief. That Jesus' charge was to the disciples and not to the people in general and that to them the coming Thief will be "your" Lord both prove that it is the believers who are figured in the Lord's parables at the end of Matthew 24. The rapture into the Lord's presence prior to the great tribulation will be a reward to those who keep, guard, hold to, and attend to the things of the divine life in the present age. Near the end of the great tribulation Christ will come again, this time openly and in power. Jesus said,

THOSE WHO ADEQUATELY  
EXPERIENCE AND ENJOY THE  
DIVINE LIFE IN THE PRESENT AGE  
WILL BE REWARDED WITH  
THE FULL ENJOYMENT OF LIFE  
IN THE COMING KINGDOM AGE.

Just as the lightning comes forth from the east and shines to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be...After the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the

heavens will be shaken. And at that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the land will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. (vv. 27-30)

These verses refer to the open coming of the Lord, which will be visible and accompanied by supernatural signs. At this time those redeemed and regenerated believers who were not prepared for the Lord's secret coming will have been ripened in the divine life through the sufferings of the tribulation. Then they, "who are left remaining, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thes. 4:17).

Christ tells the church in Sardis, "You shall by no means know at what hour I will come upon you" (Rev. 3:3). In John 14:18 He told His disciples, "I am coming to you" (cf. v. 23; 16:7). *To* in Greek is πρὸς in the accusative case, indicating a motion toward. In Revelation 3:3, however, Christ as the Thief comes not *to* but *upon* (ἐπί) the unprepared Christian. Concerning *come upon* in this verse, Watchman Nee points out,



“Come” is to come by descending. “Upon” in Greek is *epi*, which means I will descend by your side, not come upon you, but apart from you. The coming of the thief is a coming of *epi*. We are here, and he prowls up by our side. The Lord’s use of words is very ingenious. We can translate it as, “I will come and pass by you, yet you will not know it.” (58)

This is similar to the Lord’s word to the accusing Pharisees: “The kingdom of God has come upon [ἐπί] you” (Matt. 12:28). Christ as the reality of the kingdom came among the unbelieving Jews and was by their side, but they did not recognize Him (cf. 23:36; Luke 11:20; 21:34; Acts 13:40). To come *upon* in the New Testament bears the distinct connotation of judgment. Christ’s coming *upon* the deadened believers in Sardis will be a judgment to them, not a release in the glory of rapture. This is a hard word yet a true testimony, which the New Testament calls “the word of righteousness” (Heb. 5:13). Arno C. Gaebelein concludes,

Sardis...is the reformation period, the movement which produced Protestantism. The reformation itself was of God and the great men who were used were the most mighty instruments of the Holy Spirit. It was the greatest work, up to that time, since the days of the apostles. But out of it came the human systems which go by the name of Protestantism. The reformation began well, but soon developed in the different Protestant systems into a dead, lifeless thing. They have a name to live but are dead. This is the verdict of our Lord upon the churches which sprung out of the reformation. (219-220)

The ministers of the Reformation accomplished a great work in God’s economy, and the believers who have sprung up under them are forever blessed by their heritage. However, the recovery carried out by the reformed churches has not brought the Lord’s work to completion, and many of the things bequeathed by the Reformation have been neglected or even lost. Moreover, few Christians today adequately understand the things of the eternal divine life, and fewer still live in the daily application and enjoyment of this life. Many genuine believers are spiritually dead, do not participate in the subjective enjoyment of the divine life, and subsequently will be unaware of the Lord’s coming as a thief in His secret appearing to His seekers. Nee concludes, “The Lord Jesus is coming back soon. The day is getting closer. May we be precious enough to be ‘stolen’ by the Lord” (59).

by John Campbell

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Bullinger argues at length for the Hebrew character of Revelation. He states that interpreting the churches in chapters 2 and 3 as New Testament churches is a “fantastic idea” and a

“great evil” (64). Regrettably, space does not allow us to reply in full to this extreme dispensational view.

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed exposition of the coming of the Lord, its secret and open aspects, and the rapture of the believers, please see “The Rapture of the Saints,” *Affirmation & Critique*, vol. 11, no. 2, (Oct. 2006), pp. 74-91; *Affirmation & Critique*, vol. 12, no. 1, (Apr. 2007), pp. 68-83; and *Affirmation & Critique*, vol. 12, no. 2, (Oct. 2007), pp. 72-86.

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