

Revelation 3:4-6

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Jesus promises blessings to those in the church in Sardis who have not defiled themselves, telling them that they will be safe from the second death and will have their good deeds exalted in the presence of God.

The letter to the church in Sardis now transitions into the blessing portion for those who have been faithful.

First, Jesus outlines what it means to have been a faithful witness in this context:

But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.

Those who *have not soiled their garments* represents those who are living a genuine faith, rather than just keeping up appearances, as is the primary condition of the church in Sardis (Revelation 3:1). The Bible often uses imagery of dirtiness with sin. For example, the Psalmist asks God to take away his sin, saying:

“Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”
(Psalm 51:7)

Here, to be without sin is synonymous with being clean and washed white.

Another passage likens God to the soap of a “fuller,” a launderer who cleans dirty clothing:

“But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap.”
(Malachi 3:2)

In this verse from Malachi, God is like the fire that refines ore into precious metal, or soap that makes dirty clothes clean. Each turns something useless into something useful.

The clear indication is that we want to avoid having God “clean up for us.” If He does the refining, the cleaning, then we get no reward. The great reward comes if we *have not soiled our garments* and remain clean. The word *garments* as used here likely represent the deeds or works of the believers. To have a *garment* that is *white* would indicate a life lived without being soiled by the world; so therefore a life filled with righteous deeds. The fact that the believers in Sardis are being called to repent tells us that we can start anew if we confess our sins and repent (1 John 1:9).

If we do not soil our earthly *garments*, that represent our deeds on earth, then we will gain the reward of being *clothed in white garments* in the next life. In the ancient world, one's position was often indicated by their clothing. The idea seems to be that those who are *worthy* by living an obedient life, will *walk with Me in white garments*, which indicate a position of honor in God's kingdom.

The reward Jesus will give to His faithful servants will not only gain the distinction of clothing, but they will *walk with Me*. This possibly reflects the promise that those who overcome as Jesus overcame will share Jesus's rule of the New Earth (Revelation 3:21). Those who do not soil their robes will be like the good and faithful servants in the Parable of the Talents. They were faithful in a few things their master gave them to steward (in this life), so they were given the great reward or ruling over many things (in the next life). But they did not rule over many things alone, but in the fellowship and joy of their master (Matthew 25:21, 23). Perhaps those who rule in service to Christ in the world that is to come will wear special white garments that designate the honor of their position, and *walk with Jesus* in ruling over His realm.

The word used for *soiled* in the phrase *have not soiled their garments* (Revelation 3:4) is the Greek word “molyō,” which is used in the New Testament to refer to people who have not kept themselves pure by eating food sacrificed to idols and committing sexual sin. These are primary temptations warned about in the letters to the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira (Revelation 2:12-29). In this case in Sardis, this might imply that some believers are praised for not defiling themselves in such sin. Therefore, they are like those *few people* who have not *soiled their garments*.

It is God's will that His servants walk in a sanctified manner, a manner set apart from the world. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 states this directly, and the first example given of what it looks like to walk in a sanctified manner is to stay clean of sexual sin. Sexual sin is exploitation of others for our own pleasure. We are rather to love and serve others. This is a primary way to maintain *garments* that are *not soiled*.

It is worth noting that the *few people* in the church in Sardis *who have not soiled their garments* are commended, but the church as a whole is chastised. Each person will be judged according to their own deeds. But apparently the church's overall condition, leadership, and culture is also something that God judges. The Old Testament indicates that normally a few righteous people will preserve an entire town, or nation. God told Abraham He would preserve the city of Sodom from judgment if there were ten righteous men in it (Genesis 18:32). God also told Israel that they had gotten so bad that even if “Noah, Daniel and Job were in [Israel's] midst, by their own righteousness they could only deliver themselves” (Ezekiel 14:14). In this case, Sardis has a few that are righteous, but they alone will not preserve the church. It must repent as a whole.

This section speaks of rewards or consequences for choices made by believers. Those who make choices to walk in obedience to Christ are *worthy* to receive honor from Jesus. Believers become new creations in Christ not because they are worthy, but because Jesus is worthy. Jesus took on the sins of the world on our behalf (Colossians 2:14). Believers receive new birth into God's eternal family as a gift that is freely given (Romans 5:18). Believers receive a spiritual new birth

and are born into God's family by the grace of God, solely by faith (John 3:14-16; Ephesians 2:8-9).

However, believers will be rewarded for deeds done while living in this world. Those rewards are granted based on whether God deems them to be *worthy* of receiving the reward. Believers in Jesus can expect to receive appropriate rewards for their deeds at the Judgment Seat of Christ, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10). Jesus promises He will generously reward those who live as faithful witnesses. But believers experience rewards now as well. For instance, when we live according to God's commands, we experience His blessings in this life, including His peace (Colossians 3:15). All rewards God gives are a result of His mercy, because no one can obligate God (Romans 4:5; 2 Timothy 1:18). To live as a faithful witness is to trust and believe the promise of Jesus, and therefore walk in His ways (Hebrews 11:6).

The promise Jesus makes as to how He will reward *he who overcomes* is three-fold:

1. that he will *be clothed in white garments*
2. at *I (Jesus) will not erase his name from the book of life*, and
3. that *I (Jesus) will confess his name before My Father and before His angels*.

The imagery of being *clothed in white garments* is the first reward promised to *he who overcomes*. In each of the seven letters, there are special rewards for a special class of believers, described as *he who overcomes*. Even though this says *he*, this promise would include any believer who is found *worthy* of receiving this reward, regardless of their station in life (Galatians 3:28). To overcome is to resist temptation by the world, including rejection and death, and continue in faithfulness to Jesus ([for more, read our Tough Topics Explained: Overcomers](#)).

To be *clothed in white garments* seems to be connected with the reward of having a special position given to *he who overcomes*, to reign in the new earth in harmony with and service to Jesus (Revelation 3:21). The *white garments* might indicate this authority to reign.

The second reward for being an overcomer is an avoidance of a negative consequence: *I will not erase his name from the book of life*. Paul speaks of the *book of life* as being the place where his "fellow workers" have their names written (Philippians 4:3). This would indicate that the *book of life* is a book that contains all who have been declared righteous in the sight of God by faith (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3).

The *book of life* is spoken of in Revelation as being one of a number of books which will be applied in God's judgment of all who have lived. It is the book that contains the names of those who avoid being "thrown into the lake of fire."

We see this in Revelation 20, where God is executing judgment, using a number of books:

"Books were opened; and another book was opened, which is *the book of life*" (Revelation 20:12).

The *book of life* is the only book in this scene mentioned by name. So it is given special prominence.

This judgement covers each person present who is judged “according to their deeds” (Revelation 20:12). The passage then says:

“And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

(Revelation 20:15)

Taken alone, for God to *erase his name from the book of life* could mean a number of things. As with all scripture, it takes an examination of context to derive a meaning that fits with the immediate and broader biblical context.

If we take this to mean that *he who overcomes* represents those who will spend eternity in heaven as a child of God, that would equate “overcomer” with “believer in Jesus.” The problem with taking this approach is that it does not fit the context either of Revelation or of the rest of scripture. With respect to Revelation, we see that in the seventh and last letter, Jesus eliminates the idea that to “overcome” means to believe in Jesus and receive the free gift of being justified in the sight of God. This is because Jesus says that He Himself is an overcomer.

“He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”

(Revelation 3:21)

Jesus exhorts His servants to overcome, even as He overcame. Clearly Jesus did not have sin, and did not believe in Himself in order to be justified in the sight of God. So the station of overcomer must be a subset of those who are believers in Jesus. To be one who *overcomes* is to be one who has been made *worthy* by doing righteous deeds, remaining unsoiled by the world. Being made righteous in God’s sight comes only by faith, not by deeds (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:1-6). What Jesus speaks of here is not His acceptance of believers. Believers are fully accepted and belong to God’s family because it is a gift, freely given. What Jesus speaks of here is what He will approve. To be found *worthy* of being rewarded is to have lived as a faithful witness. It will be a believer’s greatest joy to have lived a life that is approved by their Maker.

Revelation is written to Jesus’s servants, who are promised a great blessing if they read, hear, and heed (do) the words of this prophecy (Revelation 1:3). To read, hear, and heed (do) is not presented as a condition of being a servant. Rather it is presented as an opportunity and incentive for each servant to be found *worthy* of receiving approval and rewards from Jesus.

So this leaves two apparent possibilities. The first is that anyone who is a believer, but then has their *name* erased from the *book of life* due to unfaithfulness, will experience the lake of fire for a time, but not for eternity. This interpretation would necessarily need to fit with the reward of avoidance offered in the letter to Smyrna, that:

“He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death”
(Revelation 2:11b).

The “second death” is defined as the lake of fire in Revelation 20:14. As discussed in the commentary on Smyrna, the possibility here is that the lake of fire is how a sinner experiences the presence of God. As scripture says, “our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29). The unveiled, glorified Jesus will be so bright as to eliminate the need for the sun (Revelation 21:23). This could mean that only those who have been refined and cleansed in the refining fire are able to bear and enjoy the unveiled presence of Christ. Just as the righteous prophet Isaiah did not enjoy being in God’s presence until he had the sin of his lips removed with a coal of fire, so it will be with believers who have soiled garments (Isaiah 6:5-7).

There are many images throughout the Old Testament of God as a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29, Daniel 7:9-11, Deuteronomy 9:3, and 2 Kings 1:10-12). God often shows up in the form of a fire, so it is possible that the lake of fire is not a place, but the presence of the holiness of God, just like in Exodus 24:

“And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the mountain top.”
(Exodus 24:17)

Israel was terrified by this presence of God, and asked that God distance Himself from them (Deuteronomy 18:15-16).

So, by Jesus promising that *I will not erase his name from the book of life*, which means *he who overcomes* will not be thrown into and “hurt” by the lake of fire, that means that he will not be “hurt” by God’s presence. This is because he will already have been cleansed by fiery trials in this life (James 1:2-4,12; 1 Peter 4:12-19).

1 Corinthians 3:9-15 details the judgement fire that will test each “building” (of deeds) a person builds through the deeds they do while living on this earth. This will occur in “the day” that is the day of judgement by Christ:

“Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is *to be* revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work.”
(1 Corinthians 3:12-13)

Those whose deeds remain after the refining fire will have a reward, but those whose work is burned up will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved through the judgment fire (1 Corinthians 3:15).

Those whose works are burned up could be described as having a part in the lake that burns with fire. They would be hurt, but not consumed (Revelation 2:11). This seems to have been the accepted notion in the early church. This notion eventually evolved into the teaching of the doctrine of “Purgatory” as a place of refining fire where sins would be “purged” from the

believer. This was such a motivational factor for the early church that the church had to encourage believers not to deliberately try to be martyred (so they could have a good judgement from Jesus for having suffered for His name). It appears that this great motivating belief was eventually twisted into a fundraising scheme by men who promised intercession and avoidance of refining fire in exchange for money.

This manipulative practice was appropriately discredited and discarded. But the underlying motivation should remain. Scripture is sober about the consequence of sin. The consequence of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Death is separation. Sin separates the believer from the abundant life God desires for us while living on earth (Romans 1:18, 24,26,28). Living in sin also robs us of the greatest of blessings in terms of reward in the next life as well.

All believers are destined to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). The process of conforming to the image of Christ requires refining fire. The basic choice for each believer seems to be whether to choose to be refined by the consuming fire of the judgment of Christ at His judgment (a poor choice), or to choose to be refined by living faithfully through the fire of trials in this life, which grows our faith, and secures our great reward (James 1:2, 12). Both choices hurt. The question is “Which hurt should we choose?” This passage advocates that we choose the hurt of rejection and loss by the world. Any believer who lives faithfully, without having *soiled their garments* is one who will gain the reward of one who has overcome, because they will be found by Jesus to be *worthy* of receiving that reward.

It seems likely that a part of how Jesus is judging worthiness is by whether someone is willing to serve in love. It makes logical sense that it will only be those who are tested by faith to be willing to serve are found *worthy* to rule in His kingdom. Jesus will have no self-seeking rulers in His kingdom.

The alternative to being refined in this life through faithful living is being refined by the consuming fire in heaven at the judgment seat of Christ. Some biblical descriptions for His servants, believers, who take the path of least resistance offered by the world, and soil their garments with the world, are as follows:

- They are “hurt by the second death” (Revelation 2:11)
- Some “sons of the kingdom” will experience weeping and gnashing of teeth” because they were excluded from being honored (Matthew 8:12)
- Those whose deeds are burned in the refining fire of Jesus will “suffer loss.” Yet they themselves will be “saved, yet so as through fire.” (1 Corinthians 3:15).
- Those who do not endure will be denied the privilege and great reward of reigning with Christ (Matthew 25:26,30; 2 Timothy 2:12)

This graphic picture ought to spur each believer to realize the immense stakes that will result from our choices. It is worth reflecting now on the opening assertion of Revelation 1:3, that anyone who reads, hears, and heeds (does) the words of this prophecy will gain an immense blessing. To gain the great rewards of the overcomer, as one who lived life as a faithful witness, avoids the tremendous loss associated with being one of whom Jesus will say *I will erase his name from the book of life*.

Another explanation of this passage, that would fit together with the prior explanation, and that also fits the context of Revelation in particular and scripture as a whole, is that there are three categories of humans relative to the *book of life*:

1. Humans who have believed and have their name written in the *book of life*.
2. Humans who have believed and have had their name written in the *book of life*, but then have had their name erased.
3. Humans who have never had their name written in the *book of life*.

What follows is the ramification of such a distinction.

First, all who have believed in Jesus and have their names written in the *book of life* are given an inheritance to reign with Christ, and they receive the inheritance of an overcomer upon their new birth in Christ. It is granted to them and only remains to be possessed. If the believer refuses to possess their inheritance, then their name is erased. They are still God's child, but they are no longer an inheritor.

Just as Israel was granted an inheritance, but then had to endure the trials of the wilderness and of war in order to possess their inheritance, so it is for every believer. The inheritance is granted, but they must be found *worthy* to possess it. The second generation of those who left Egypt would represent those who were *worthy*. They possessed the grant of inheritance because they walked in obedience to God and endured trials in order to possess their inheritance: the Promised Land. Obedient believers do not have their name erased and receive the reward of an overcomer.

All who believe in Jesus but do not endure the trials of life are like the first generation of Israelites who left Egypt. They will not possess their inheritance. This is represented by having their names erased. Because their name was written in the book, they will still spend eternity in heaven. But they will be refined in Jesus's refining fire and suffer loss. They will be saved, though as through fire (1 Corinthians 3:15).

All who never believe in Jesus will never have their names written in the *book of life*. They will also go into Jesus's fire of judgment. However, rather than be refined by the judgment fire and be conformed to the image of Christ, they will be consumed. This will be their destiny.

This could be pictured by the soldiers being slain by the heat of the fiery furnace into which the three faithful witnesses of Daniel were thrown, while the three faithful Hebrews communed with a figure thought to be the pre-incarnate Christ (Daniel 3:2-27). The fire consumed the unbelievers, but imposed no harm on the faithful Hebrews.

Once Jesus's refining fire has done its work, all His people will be conformed to His image. There will come a time when all sorrow ends, and all tears are wiped away (Revelation 21:4). However, for those who are not redeemed, it might be that being in the presence of Christ will mean an agonizing eternity.

It is important to note that the name is *erased* from the *book of life*, not that it was never in there in the first place.

As we see in Revelation 13, the people who will worship the “beast” or “antichrist” never had their names written in the *book* to begin with:

“All who dwell on the earth will worship him, *everyone* whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain” (Revelation 13:8).

This passage does imply that there will be those living on the earth who will never have their names written in the *book of life*. But that is not the case for those in the church in Sardis. Their threat is that Jesus will *erase* their *name* if they do not align their deeds with their faith and make it come alive. Jesus has redeemed them and written down their name in the *book of life*, but that does not mean that they will not also be held accountable and judged.

Judgement day requires a refining process to see what stands firm when put to the test. Metals are forged in fire and come out stronger than before, but materials like wood, hay, and straw will burn up (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). A possible reason that the one who *overcomes* will not be *hurt* here is because their faith has already been refined in this life. They were hurt and matured by the fiery trials of this life. Therefore, when the one who *overcomes* stands before the judgement seat of Christ, there will be little or nothing left that has to be refined.

We might ask “How much is enough?” That will be up to Jesus. He is a discerner of thoughts and intents (Hebrews 11:6). Our Father desires to reward us (Luke 11:13). It is never too late to begin being faithful, as the parable of the vineyard workers illustrates. There the vineyard owner (representing God) rewarded those who came late to work in the vineyard as much as He gave those who worked the entire day. He did this because He is generous (Matthew 20:1-16). We can also remain aware that we determine our own standard by which we are measured by how we judge others (Matthew 7:2).

The theme of judgement also comes up earlier in this letter to the church in Sardis:

“If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.” (Revelation 3:3)

Part of waking up and watching is being aware that you are being judged. If you know that judgement day is coming, it will not be a surprise when you are held accountable for your actions. But if you are asleep, then it will be shocking when Jesus comes to judge unexpected, like a thief appearing in the night without warning.

We can see in this passage from Romans 8 the distinction between those whose names are written in the *book of life* (who may or may not have it erased), and those who enter heaven still having their name written, and therefore gain the reward of the inheritance:

“The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also

be glorified with Him.”
(Romans 8:16-17)

There are two inheritances in this passage from Romans: “heirs of God” and “fellow heirs with Christ.” All believers are “heirs of God.” But only overcomers will be “fellow heirs with Christ” because these overcomers must “suffer with Him” and receive the reward of being “glorified with Him.”

Note in this passage from Romans 8 that it applies to believers who are the children of God, who have the inner testimony of the “Spirit Himself.” Every believer has God as an inheritance from the moment they believe. Note the phrase “we are children of God” is unconditional. Every believer has God as an inheritance because they are placed into Christ upon believing in Him (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 15:22). God is our Father, and we His children regardless of the choices we make. To be an heir of God would apply to all believers, even one whose name is erased.

Also note that in this passage from Romans 8 that in order to be “glorified with Him,” gaining the rewards that He also was given (Revelation 3:21), we must “suffer with Him.” That is, if we overcome, as He overcame, we will share His reward. In order to gain this reward, our name must not be erased. We must suffer as Jesus suffered. Jesus suffered rejection from the world because He lived apart from the world. To gain this great inheritance, our garments must remain unsoiled by the world.

The final reward Jesus promises to *He who overcomes* is that He *will confess his name before My Father and before His angels*. The word translated *confess* can also be rendered as “declare” or “acknowledge.” The idea seems to be that the one *who overcomes* will gain special recognition. And the recognition will be Jesus giving a testimony about the overcomer in the presence of His *Father*, and of His *angels*.

We might imagine a “lifetime achievement award” banquet. At such an event, there are usually various people who stand and acknowledge/declare/confess various achievements that the honoree has done. Perhaps a singer has others sing their songs in tribute, for example. Ideally, such an award banquet would have highly respected artists doing the tribute.

In this case the One who deserves all honor, and all glory, will instead use His great position of authority to give honor to those who faithfully served Him. Jesus will honor the faithful believers *before My Father and before His angels*. We know that the *angels* watch humans (1 Peter 1:12), in part to understand the wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:10). Perhaps they all get to see the lives of various humans they have watched reviewed all at once and have an opportunity to appreciate them.

In any event, this will be an honor banquet that is beyond our greatest dreams. It is an incredible offer. But it only goes to those who will heed the words of Revelation and seek to be faithful witnesses who do not fear loss, rejection, or death.

The letter to the church in Sardis ends with a familiar refrain: *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*. This is echoed throughout the letters to the seven churches and refers back to the instructions in Revelation 1:3 to read, hear, and heed (do) the words of the prophecy. The promise of Revelation 1:3 is that anyone who reads, hears, and heeds (does) the admonitions in Revelation will be “blessed.” With this letter in particular that is quite tangible.

There are amazing benefits for living as a faithful witness for Jesus, with garments unsoiled by the world. And there are corresponding severe losses associated with unfaithfulness. Jesus wants this to be clear, so we understand the real and eternal ramifications of our choices.

Jesus wants the church in Sardis to embrace true life in Him. If we embrace a false life, we will gain an illusion of life while on earth and lose our great reward in the next world. But if we embrace true life, which also means embracing death, the second death will not hurt us. As Jesus said during His tenure on earth:

“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.”
(Mark 8:34-35)

This letter to Sardis seems to be putting some meat on the bones of this principle from Mark 8.

Biblical Text

⁴But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. ⁶He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’