

Text: Various

Title: The Book of Life

Truth: The Book of Life is a list of all people who are/will be saved.

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Introduction

Back in May of 2019, I wrote on my blog about the Book of Life. I had received the following question:

I have a question about names written in the Lamb's Book of Life. It was my understanding that our names are added to the Book of Life when we accept Jesus' atonement for our sin natures (i.e., saved by grace through faith). But some verses seem to indicate that all people are in the Book of Life until they reject that God-designed provision. These texts include Exodus 32:33, Deuteronomy 29:20, Psalm 69:28, Isaiah 48:19, and Revelation 3:5.

There are two “books” with similar names mentioned in the Bible. We will discuss them below.

But allow me first to clarify the part of the question that speaks of the “atonement for our sin natures.” The saving work of Jesus Christ is not limited to fixing our *sin natures*. His atoning cross-work pays the moral penalty due to us for the actual acts of sin that we have done; it breaks the power of the sin nature and eventually will remove it from us entirely; and it addresses the problem of the sin imputed from Adam to each and every human being. The atoning work of Christ solves *the entire sin problem of the human race*. He died for our sins according to the Scriptures—all of the acts, the sinful nature out of which they come, and the very constitution of our beings as sinful members of Adam’s race. This is what God has provided in the gospel.

And second, let me clarify the part of the question which speaks of “accepting Jesus’ atonement.” This can be mistaken for a mere intellectual acknowledgement that Christ died and rose again. That is necessary, but not sufficient. To be more precise, to accept or welcome the truth of God in Jesus, God calls us to use our wills and

affections as well as our minds, to **repent** of sin and **believe** the good news of Jesus. We are commanded by God to **turn** from idols to serve Christ, to turn to God and have an entirely different mindset about sin. This is the response God requires for us to become Christians, that is, followers of Jesus Christ. This kind of response permits us to enjoy eternal life and its blessings, such as forgiveness of sin and victory over sin and death.

I. The Book of the Living

The **first book** we must consider is the "book of the living" which is mentioned in Psalm 69:28. The Psalmist asks God to delete the names of their enemies from the book of the living, and to not list their names with the righteous. The last phrase could be another way of saying the same thing, or a reference to the other "book" we are studying in these notes.

A. The first phrase about "blotting people out of the book of the living" is poetic way of referring to taking someone's life. The book of the living is the census or list of all people who are alive at a given time. So, to wipe someone out of that book is a euphemistic way of saying that the person would be killed. In other words, they would be "cut off from the land of the living" (like the Messiah, Isaiah 53:8¹). It is interesting to note that Acts 1:20 quotes Psalm 69:25 about Judas Iscariot. He was blotted out from physical life, and he certainly was not listed with the righteous in any list.

In either view of the second phrase, note that it only asks that they not be written with the righteous—not that they be erased.

B. Other Biblical phrases express the same thing. Deut. 29:18-20 says that stubborn-hearted rebels will be blotted out from under heaven. This means that they will be killed. Isaiah 48:19 is used a corporately of Israel (48:1, 12)—if they had listened to God, they would not have been destroyed. The "cutting off" means ceasing to exist on the earth. For another example, see Exodus 17:14.

¹ Many other passages in the OT use this round-about language "cut off" to speak of killing someone. See Exod. 12:19; Deut. 19:1; Jos. 7:9; 1 Sam. 28:9, 31:9; 1 Ki. 9:7; 2 Chr. 26:21; Ps. 37:34, 101:8; Isa. 53:8; Jer. 11:19, 44:8, 50:16; Ezek. 14:13, 17, 19, 21:3; Mic. 5:11; Zeph. 1:3; Zech. 11:16, 13:2, 8.

- C. With this background, we can better understand Exodus 32:32-33 in which Moses wishes to die physically, perhaps in place of the Israelites who had sinned by worshipping a golden calf idol—or perhaps because the burden was so great upon him. In either case, if the Lord will not forgive Israel, Moses prefers death to life. The Lord replies to Moses’ request that it is the one who has sinned who will die (Ezekiel 18:4, 20).
- D. The **book of the living** therefore is a register of all who are presently alive. Names are erased as each one dies and moves out of the land of the living. This act of erasure is in a sense always a judgment—because sin brings death. But for God’s people, I think we can correctly say that the name is tenderly removed from the book because God has a special loving care for His own.

II. The Book of Life

The alert reader may remember a case like Moses in the life of Paul—Romans 9:2-3. There, Paul says that he wishes he could be accursed from Christ for his Israelite brothers, that they might come to faith in Messiah. This sounds different than a wish for immediate physical death—note the phrase “accursed from Christ.” The focus is on spiritual separation from Christ as a substitute for others. That is, if it were possible, Paul would trade his salvation for theirs. Paul would have his name erased from the book of the saved so they could get theirs put into that book. And that is the second book, to which we now turn.

The **second book** is the Lamb’s Book of Life, or “the **Book of Life**.” It is the book census or list of all people who are/will be saved. This is revealed mainly in the New Testament (but see Daniel 12:1). This is *not* the same as the first book. The Book of Life is the registry of all the redeemed of all ages, whether in the church age, Tribulation, Kingdom, or Old Testament period.

- A. Two areas I want to de-emphasize in your mind. First, some may wish to have a separate Book of Life for the church, one for Israel, another for Tribulation saints, etc. I am going to treat these as chapters of the one list of all the saved of all time. Second, I am not big on emphasizing that there is an actual codex/book in heaven,

made with paper and cardboard and glued at the spine, that has a huge list of names in it. I cannot be dogmatic that there is such a book or scroll in Heaven. But in effect we can think of it that way. God knows that list of names intuitively and instantaneously, and the reason for that is that He is not only omniscient, but more importantly, He has graciously chosen to bestow eternal life on each person listed in the book. He knows *because* He decided that would be the case. Passages that refer to this book are Philippians 4:3, Revelation 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 20:15, 21:27, and 22:19 (the last verse has a major asterisk next to it).

- B. Of these, several passages offer difficulties to the Bible reader. Revelation 3:5 says, "I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life." I take this not to say that names will be erased or can be erased, but that they will NOT be erased! Most people read this and believe that there is a possibility of erasure, particularly if you fail to "overcome." I do not read it that way, and I believe that it is an Arminian tendency to emphasize the erasure view. Overcomers (by faith, 1 John 5:4) will never lose their salvation. They will never be erased from the book. They cannot lose their status as a saved person. Far from being a statement of doubt, this verse is a great assurance to those who trust Christ.
- C. Revelation 13:8 attaches the phrase "from the foundation of the world" to "the lamb that was slain." This is a good interpretation based on the word order, but it could be understood to refer to the names of the people not in the Book of Life from way back at that time. Whether or not that is the case, Revelation 17:8 makes it clear that "from the foundation of the world" is associated with the names not written in the Book of Life. The point is this: there are names that NEVER have been written in the Lamb's Book of Life. In other words, there are people whose names have never appeared in there. By implication, (1) those names cannot be erased, since they have never been present; and (2) there must be names in the book which *have* been present since the foundation of the world.
- D. Revelation 22:19 is another passage that indicates the possibility of a name being taken away from the Book of Life. But there are major textual transmission problems at this point in the Textus

Receptus (and thus the English KJV and NKJV translations). The correct text is not "Book of Life" but "tree of life." Why? The critical text AND the vast majority of Greek manuscripts say "tree of life." Reading it as "tree of life" eliminates the only other verse in the Bible that could suggest a person's name can be removed from the Book of Life.

"Take away his part" is simply a statement of judgment—if you mess with God's book, God will see to it that you have no share in the tree of life. That is, the possibility of heaven is out of the question for people who have a character that corrupts God's word. Believing people do not do that sort of thing.

Similar is verse 18, which says God will *add* plagues to someone who adds to the words of the book. The addition of plagues does not mean that they were a believer before and now they have been taken out of that status. Similarly, the taking away of the opportunity to share in the tree of life does not mean that they were a believer before or had their name in the Book of Life before and now have been taken out of that standing.

- E. One view of how the Book of Life is "written" is what I call the "erasure" view or "start full" view. This suggests that the names of all humans who ever existed or will exist were written in the Book of Life at the beginning of time. Names are erased as people die without exercising faith in Christ. One problem with this view is that there is no text that clearly says names WILL be erased. Furthermore, Revelation 17:8 tells us plainly that there are some names which are not written in the book at any time. The "start full" view fails at Revelation 17:8.
- F. Then there is the "start empty" view. It would seem to make more sense to have zero names in the Lamb's Book of Life at the beginning—because we are all sinners deserving of eternal punishment from birth. Our names do not deserve to be in the book at all. One's name would be added when one comes to faith in Christ. I think that is a very common understanding. But that does not work, because it seems there are some names that are present in the book from the foundation of the world, and some that are not (see above explanation).

So, neither the "start empty" nor the "start full" views of the Book of Life are workable.

G. Think about this very important related issue. Who has the power to put a name in or out of the Book of Life? If your answer is "people" then you will likely have a start-full or start-empty view. You are reflecting the idea that salvation not only involves a person's participation, but it is ultimately *based* on that person's choice. This puts God in a reactive position instead of in charge, as He is.

If your answer is "God," then you have an entirely different perspective. Then you are saying that salvation is ultimately based on God's choice. The latter better fits the Biblical revelation. God is the author of life, and also of the Book of Life. Only He writes names in that book.

H. And since God knows everything (John 16:30, 21:17) and in fact has decreed everything to come to pass as it does—and that is how He knows it—He never has to make edits to His book. To God, there are no surprising additions or deletions to the Book of Life. Consequently, I understand that names are not ever added or subtracted from the Book of Life. The names were set down there from before the foundation of the world and that list is fixed and inviolable for all eternity. It is the list of those known as *the elect*. Some of them have already come to faith, and some shall come to faith before they die.² The impossibility of erasure reflects the doctrine of eternal security. The impossibility of addition means that people who are not elect will not be saved. This may sound harsh, but read the next paragraphs.

I. Who are the elect? I do not know, and only God knows. But I will give a couple of caveats: we *can* know with relative certainty if someone comes to genuine faith, and we *can* know about ourselves if we are believers, save for self-deception. We do know that there are some people whom God has graciously chosen to bless with salvation because of certain clear texts of the Bible

² I believe that even infants who die in infancy are listed in this book, and God graciously regenerates them so they can partake in the eternal kingdom. That is an area of some debate among theologians.

(Ephesians 1:4, 2 Thess. 2:13, 1 Thess. 1:4, 2 Timothy 2:10, Titus 1:1, and others). But as for the billions of people on the planet, we cannot know who the elect ones are in advance. Consequently, we preach the gospel widely, praying to reach people who will respond. Ultimately we will not know who is elect until after the fact. God knows the elect before the fact. But God's knowledge does not change our responsibility!

In other words, since we do not know and cannot know in advance who is elect among unbelieving people, the doctrine of election makes little practical difference to the mechanics of how we accomplish the Great Commission. As far as the unsaved are concerned in our view, is *as if* there is no such thing as a Book of Life. We must minister to everyone we can as if they are a real prospect, because they are as far as we know!

On the other hand, the doctrine of election *does* make a difference because God has people that He is going to save. In every age there are some, somewhere, sometimes more than others. Acts 18:10 is commonly understood to refer to the fact that God has people yet to save in Corinth, not just those already saved. This propels us forward to find those ones, few though they may be.

As well, for the saved, the Book of Life and the associated doctrine of eternal security is a powerful encouragement that God's saved ones will never be lost. Their names are written and will never be erased! In this way, being elect has an impact on our psyche, because we can marvel that God would choose us—unworthy as we are—to be His children! This propels us to worship Him because He is worthy. It also moves us to service because we do not need to be stuck in the no man's land of doubt about losing salvation all the time.

Conclusion

If there is someone who genuinely wants to get saved, and is afraid they are not listed in the Book of Life, quickly disabuse them of that thinking by telling them that God commands us to repent and believe the gospel. If you do that, you are saved, and thus prove that you were listed in the book. From the human perspective,

since we do not and cannot know who is "in" and who is "out" in advance, we must not worry about who is in the book, and instead focus on obeying God, and everything will be fine.

For us who want to share the life-giving message with others, our job is not to figure out if someone is elect. Our job is to proclaim the gospel. Never are we told to have someone wait and let them figure out if they are in the Book or not. They know by learning and properly responding to the gospel of Christ.

For us who want to receive the life-giving message of Jesus, we do not look to the Book of Life. We look to the Lamb of God who saves. We repent and believe in Jesus Christ. He died to cleanse us from our sins and give us a new life.

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