

# The Book of Life

## **Introduction**

One item that is familiar to many Christians is the concept of “the book of life”. It is rather interesting that the book of life is so well known; given that there are very few references in Scripture to it. In fact, in most English translations, the phrase “book of life” only occurs **eight** times in Scripture – one occurrence in Psalms, one in Philippians, and six in Revelation.

The book of life is essentially a *metaphor*, which refers to the people who will be *saved*. For example, consider the following passage:

### **Revelation 20:14-15 (ESV):**

<sup>14</sup> Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. <sup>15</sup> And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

As shown above, a person’s name must be listed in the book of life during the final judgment, in order for him to *avoid* permanent destruction (symbolized by the lake of fire). Of course, this explains why the “book of life” metaphor is so well known, despite its few occurrences in Scripture.

## **One “mainstream” doctrine about the book of life**

There is another important item to note, about the Scriptural passages which refer to the book of life. Namely, a few of the passages which discuss the book of life contain rather “intriguing” language. For example, consider this passage:

### **Revelation 13:7-8 (ESV):**

<sup>7</sup> Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, <sup>8</sup> and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.

As noted, the above passage refers to people’s names being written in the book of life “before the foundation of the world”. The following passage uses that exact same phrase:

### **Ephesians 1:3-4 (ESV):**

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup> even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

At first glance, the two passages above might *seem* to indicate that God explicitly chose the *specific individuals* whom He would **save** – before the world even existed. In other words, those passages might appear to say that God *completely* “controls” our salvation – i.e., that **we** have absolutely nothing to do with our salvation! As it turns out, some Christian groups believe *exactly* that. In essence, some groups subscribe to the following tenets:

- Before God created the universe, He looked forward in time, and saw **all** of people who would ever live.
- Then, He arbitrarily divided up those people into two **separate** groups – the “saved” group, and the “unsaved” group.
- As a result, God has already decided which people will have everlasting life, and which people will be condemned to everlasting death – so that we have **no control** over our own salvation.

According to the above doctrine, the book of life already contains the names of the *specific individuals* who will be saved. No other names can *ever* be “added” to the book – because if a person’s name is *not* already listed there, then that means that God has **already** decided that He will not save that person. Similarly, none of the names that exist in the book can *ever* be “erased” – because if person’s name *is* listed there, then that means that God has **already** decided that He will save that person. So, that set of beliefs could be called the “permanently inscribed individuals” doctrine.

Of course, it is always necessary to **validate** church doctrines against *the whole* of Scripture. In other words, in order for any given doctrine to be Biblically sound, the doctrine needs to be consistent with *the whole* of Scripture – rather than with just a few passages.

So, let’s examine *other* Scriptural passages about the book of life, in order to determine if the “permanently inscribed individuals” doctrine agrees with Scripture or not.

### What “names” were written, before the foundation of the world?

First, consider the assertion that God chose the **specific individuals** who would be saved, before the world existed. As mentioned above, Ephesians 1:4 states that God “chose us” in Christ, before the foundation of the world. So, some groups assert that that refers to God choosing the *specific people* who would be saved.

Our modern culture puts quite a bit of emphasis on *individuals* – and as a result, it is understandable that some modern churches would assume that that verse is referring to specific individuals. However, the Biblical culture was **not** focused on individuals – instead, it was focused on groups of people. This is especially true in cases where Scripture refers to God choosing people. In essence, when Scripture refers to people that God has “chosen”, it usually refers to the group of people with whom God has made a **covenant**. That is, Scripture refers to the “chosen people” as a whole – **rather** than referring to specific individuals within that group.

There are numerous examples in Scripture, of God referring to His “chosen people” as a group. First, consider these examples from the Old Testament – in which the Israelites are referred to as a **whole**:

#### Deuteronomy 7:6 (ESV):

<sup>6</sup> “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

#### Psalms 33:12 (ESV):

Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord,  
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!

**Psalm 106:4-5 (ESV):**

<sup>4</sup> Remember me, O Lord, when you show favor to your people;  
help me when you save them,  
<sup>5</sup> that I may look upon the prosperity of your chosen ones,  
that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation,  
that I may glory with your inheritance.

**Isaiah 65:21-22 (ESV):**

<sup>21</sup> They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
<sup>22</sup> They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

The New Testament tells us that gentile followers of Jesus have been “grafted in” to the Israelite “olive tree”. In other words, gentile Christians have become co-heirs of God’s covenant with Israel – so that now Israelites **and** gentile Christians, *together*, are God’s “chosen people”.

Nevertheless, the New Testament *still* refers to God’s “chosen” people as a group – **rather** than as individuals. For example, consider these verses – in which the chosen people are referred to as a whole:

**1 Peter 2:9-10 (ESV):**

<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

**Colossians 3:12 (ESV):**

<sup>12</sup> Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience

**James 2:5 (ESV):**

<sup>5</sup> Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?

**Revelation 17:14 (ESV):**

<sup>14</sup> They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.”

As a result, when Scripture refers to the people who were “chosen before the foundation of the world”, or “written before the foundation of the world”, it is not referring to *specific individuals*. Instead, in those cases, Scripture is referring to the group of people who would **become** followers of Christ, in the future.

In other words, those passages tell us that before the world existed, God decided that the **group** of people who would choose to follow Christ would be **saved**. That is, God did not arbitrarily decide which *specific*

*people* would be saved – instead, He allows each individual to make that choice for himself. This principle will become clearer in the next section, below.

### **Are names “permanently” inscribed in the book of life?**

The other main tenet about the “permanently inscribed individuals” doctrine is the assertion that names are “permanently” written in the book of life. In other words, the belief is that once a name is written in the book, it can never be removed.

As it turns out, there are a number of passage in Scripture which indicate that names can be “blotted out” from the book of life. That is, even if a person’s name is *currently* written in the book, it can be **removed**. For example:

#### **Psalms 69:28 (NASB):**

<sup>28</sup> May they be blotted out of the book of life  
And may they not be recorded with the righteous.

#### **Exodus 32:32-33 (ESV):**

<sup>32</sup> But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.” <sup>33</sup> But the Lord said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.

#### **Revelation 3:5 (ESV):**

<sup>5</sup> The one who conquers 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.

In addition, there are a number of *other* passages in Scripture which **also** state that our salvation is not “guaranteed”. In other words, those passages *also* indicate that a believer’s name can be “blotted out” from everlasting life, if that believer does not persevere in his faith. Here are some examples of such passages:

#### **1 Corinthians 15:1-2 (NIV):**

<sup>1</sup> Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. <sup>2</sup> By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

#### **James 5:19-20 (ESV):**

<sup>19</sup> My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, <sup>20</sup> let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

#### **2 Peter 2:20-21 (ESV):**

<sup>20</sup> For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has

become worse for them than the first. <sup>21</sup> For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.

#### **Hebrews 6:4-6 (ESV):**

<sup>4</sup> For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, <sup>5</sup> and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, <sup>6</sup> and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

All of the above passages are quite explicit, about the need for people to *maintain their faith* in order to be saved. In other words, if a person does **not** persevere in faith, then he is at risk of being *excluded* from everlasting life.

As a result, Scripture does not support the doctrine that people's names are "permanently inscribed" in the book of life – on the contrary, names can definitely be "blotted out" from it. So, as mentioned in the last section, God has not decided which *individuals* will be saved – instead, He allows **us** to make the decision whether we want to follow Him or not.

#### **Conclusion**

There are a few passages in Scripture, which state that believers were "chosen before the foundation of the world". Those passages have led some Christian groups to conclude that God has already decided which *specific individuals* will be granted everlasting life – and which *specific individuals* will be condemned to everlasting death. In essence, those churches believe that God has complete control over each person's salvation – i.e., that individuals have absolutely *nothing to do* with their own salvation.

It turns out that when Scripture refers to people being "chosen" by God, it almost always refers to the group of people that God has chosen – **rather** than to any specific individuals. So, when Scripture refers to people being "chosen" before the foundation of the world, it is referring to the **group** of people who would eventually become Christians. That is, God decided – ahead of time – that the **group** of people who would *become* followers of Christ would be saved.

In addition, God allows each individual to **decide** whether he wants to become a follower of Christ or not. In other words, God did not arbitrarily decide which person would become a follower of Christ; instead, He allows each *person* to make that decision. We know this because many Scriptural passages are quite explicit that each individual needs to maintain his faith, in order to be saved. In fact, several passages in Scripture indicate that if a person does **not** maintain his faith, then his name will be "blotted out" from the book of life.

Overall, Scripture indicates that salvation is a "cooperative effort", between God and people. First, God has made it **possible** for people to be saved, through the sacrificial death of Jesus, and the pouring out of Holy Spirit into believers. Each individual must then *reciprocate*, and maintain his faith in God, in order to be granted everlasting life. So, each individual has the opportunity to be saved – rather than God arbitrarily *deciding* which individuals will be saved.

I hope this article was a blessing to you!