

SESSION 2

Revelation Chapters 2–3

THE "OVERCOMERS" OF REVELATION

*A Key Theme Emerging From The Letters To The Seven Churches***INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of the Book of Revelation is to encourage and exhort believers to perseverance and faithfulness by an unveiling of Christ as victor in His final role in world history. Of the many themes throughout the book, the motif of "overcoming" has been one of the most neglected and often misunderstood in the study of this Johannine piece of literature. However, there is good reason to believe that John was being very suggestive as he made use of this concept, as though he was seeking to elicit a response in his audience (a response that is very much related to the subject matter of his material . . . persecution and the enduring of hardship for Jesus Christ).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The concern of this paper is with the identity of those who are termed "overcomers" by John in the book of Revelation. Is this (1) a reference to *all Christians*, (2) a threat that some might lose their salvation, or (3) a reference to a more restricted group among Christians who receive a special reward for their faithfulness and endurance?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The issue at stake is not a mute point at all. There are some very serious implications arising from this, in particular having to do with the reign of Christ. That Christ is coming again to rule over His creation is the glorious promise of the Word of God (Matt 19:28; 1 Cor 15:23-25; Matt 25:31; Rev 19–20). In general, the premillennialist believes that Christ shall reign on this earth following His return, while the amillennialist denies an earthly reign after His return. Both parties, however, should be concerned with the fact that believers will reign with Christ. The question to be addressed is this: will *all* believers reign with Christ? Indeed, all believers will be present *in* Christ's kingdom, but will all believers exercise authority and judgment *with* Christ? Consider, for instance, 1 Cor 6:2, "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?" That some believers might not rule *with* Christ is perhaps suggested by the conditional implication of the Apostle Paul's comment in 2 Tim 2:12, "If we endure, we shall also reign with Him." There is no doubt that John views the "overcomers" as those who will have a share in this exercise of Christ's rule. This is clear from Rev 2:26,

"And he who overcomes, and he who keeps my deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations."

Possibly, John intends to restrict the title "overcomer" to some Christians who faithfully endure suffering for Christ, with the implication that those who do not will be denied the privilege of *exercising* the rule and authority with Christ. If this is true, the consequence of not being numbered among the "overcomers" is serious indeed, for it will mean a great loss of privilege for the believer (what is at stake here is not eternal security, but the loss of great reward).

DIFFERING APPROACHES TO THE MEANING OF "OVERCOMER"

At least four different approaches have been suggested for the interpretation of the "overcomer" theme in Revelation 2–3.

A. Loss of Salvation View

One approach is closely connected with Arminian theology (so Wesleyanism). This involves a denial of eternal security, i.e., the belief that a true Christian can lose his or her salvation. For them, the "overcomer" is the faithful Christian who perseveres in the faith and does not lose his salvation. They would hold that a verse like Rev 3:5 *implies* the possibility of a Christian losing his salvation, "He who overcomes shall 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."

But there is a big difference between a promise of not having one's name erased from the book of life and a clear statement that one will have his name erased from the book of life. Furthermore, this view suffers theologically in that it contradicts the clear teaching of other Scriptures. Dr. Wilkin points this out:

The problem with the loss-of-salvation view is that it clearly contradicts a host of passages. Jesus taught that believers "will never perish" (John 10:28), "shall not come into judgment" (John 5:24), and "have [already] passed from death into life" (John 5:24). The apostle Paul told the believers at Rome that "neither death nor life . . . nor things present nor things to come . . . shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39). To the believers at Ephesus he wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph 2:8-9).¹

B. The "Every Christian" View

The main idea behind this view is that *all Christians* are "overcomers" by virtue of their faith in Christ as Savior. Dr. Walvoord, for example, takes this view:

"The promise here mentioned for overcomers is not a message to a special group of Christians distinguished by their spirituality and power in contrast to genuine Christians who lack these qualities; it is rather a general description of that which is normal, to be expected among those who are true followers of the Lord."²

Defendants of this view interpret the references to "overcomers" in Rev 2–3 in light of the use of this word in 1 John 5:4-5,

"For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. And who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"

In these verses, John does seem to make a point that placing one's faith in Christ amounts to overcoming the world, i.e., achieving a victory over the world system that is hostile to God and controlled by the Evil One.

Defendants of this view would also point out that some of the promises in Rev 2–3 to the "overcomers" are clearly promises for *all* Christians. A case in point would be Rev 2:11, "He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." Later on in Revelation, the "second death" is identified as the lake of fire (20:15). Clearly, this is a promise for all Christians, not just some (cf. Rev 2:7).

Finally, defendants of this view would appeal to the use of the term "overcome" in Rev 21:7 where the context concerns the inauguration of the new heavens and new earth. In that verse, God promises,

"He who overcomes shall inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be my son."

¹Bob Wilkin, "I Will Not Blot Out His Name," in *The Grace Evangelical Society News* 10:2 (March-April 1995): 1.

²John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 59.

They would argue from this verse that "genuine Christians" all inherit the new creation in contrast to unbelievers who are assigned a place eternally in the lake of fire (i.e., hell).

This view is a lot more convincing than the previous one, especially since there is no denial of the doctrine of eternal security. Nevertheless, there are problems with this view. Regarding the correlation with the term "overcome" in 1 Jn 5, one should ask the question if this is a technical term for John, i.e., that John means the same thing by the same word in every context. That may not be a safe assumption. Careful study of both contexts must be made to determine if John indeed meant to use the word the same in both places. But to casually assume that he did without careful study of the context is a grave error in doing word studies. Dr. Jody Dillow has pointed this out, labelling such an error "the illegitimate identity transfer":

This occurs when a meaning in one context is made to be the meaning in all contexts. ... In 1 Jn. 5:4 it seems clear that the overcomer is a Christian and that all who are Christians are, in a particular sense, overcomers. Those who know the Lord have, according to John, overcome by virtue of the fact that they have believed and for no other reason. In Revelation, however, the overcomer is one who has "kept the word of My perseverance" (Rev. 3:10) and who "keeps My deeds until the end" (Rev. 2:26). . . . An overcomer in 1 John is simply a Christian; an overcomer in Revelation is a persevering Christian.³

If the term "overcome" does not automatically mean the same thing in every context, then we must obviously look first and foremost to the immediate context for our interpretation. In the context of Rev 2–3, one's works and perseverance are crucial for *overcoming*. I will come back to this matter later, but enough has been said to demonstrate that this view has some problems.

C. The Faithful–Obedience View

This view is similar to the previous one in that the "overcomer" is taken as a term for all Christians, not just some. However, it adds a bit more, insisting that the ones who are true Christians are living faithful-obedient lives, and that this is the mark of "true Christians." This view is closely related to the doctrine known as the "perseverance of the saints" as Dr. Wilkin has pointed out:

According to what has come to be called the Reformed Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, all true believers persevere in a life of godliness. While there may be temporary setbacks and bouts with sin, believers are people who live victorious, holy lives to the end.⁴

One author (an advocate of "Lordship salvation") writes, "John was so confident of the ultimate triumph of faith over sin that he had a special name for the believer: 'the one who overcomes' (1 John 5:5; Rev 2:7,11,26; 3:5,12,21; 21:7)."⁵

The thrust of this view is to argue that *all* "true Christians" will persevere in their faith and in a life of faithful obedience, and that this is what distinguishes true believers from those who merely profess to be Christians. All true believers live "overcoming" lives (so they say).

The problem with this view is that it rests on a false theology. Although all true Christians should live faithful, obedient, "overcoming" lives, there is no guarantee that they will do so. In fact, the Scriptures point out cases of certain Christians whose lives have gone shipwreck or who have been so sinful that the Lord has had to take them home (e.g., 1 Tim 1:19-20; 1 Cor 11:29-31; 1 Jn 5:16-

³Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Pub. Co., 1992), 37.

⁴Wilkin, 1.

⁵John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus*, rev. ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 253.

17). As we shall subsequently see, the virtue of being an "overcomer" in the context of Rev 2–3 is a *conditional* matter, not an automatic one.

D. The Eternal Rewards View

A fourth view understands the act of "overcoming" as true of some Christians, but not all. Those who overcome live faithful lives and persevere with Christ in this life. For that, they will receive special rewards when Christ returns. In my opinion, this is the correct view of Rev 2–3, and in the remainder of the paper I will seek to demonstrate why this view has the best biblical support.

CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

The idea that all Christians are overcomers (views 2 and 3) is suspect in light of the stress which Revelation places upon endurance and uttermost loyalty to Christ. The context of suffering and the praise for those who refuse to bow to the Antichrist accent this theme of perseverance. In the presentation of the Great Tribulation, the focus is not that people turn to Christ during this time of intense persecution, but that they are willing to suffer to the point of death for their faith. Martyrdom is the issue . . . loving Christ to the point that one will die in allegiance to Him. In Revelation, John never seems to stress "overcoming" in the sense of coming to faith in Christ. On the contrary, he places great stress on *maintaining* one's faith in Christ. This is where John seems to see victory realized. Aside from the messages to the seven churches, this thought is predominant elsewhere in Revelation:

And when He broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained (6:9).

And they overcame him (i.e., the Devil) because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death (12:11).

If any one is destined for captivity, to captivity he goes; if any one kills with the sword, with the sword he must be killed. Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints (13:10).

Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus (14:12).

Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments, lest he walk about naked and men see his shame (16:15).

In the light of these verses, the possibility exists that when John mentioned "overcomers," he was thinking of believers who withstood the heat of persecution in their allegiance to Jesus in contrast to those in the churches who were lukewarm and unwilling to suffer hardship for Christ. The defense of this position will now be considered.

"OVERCOMERS" AS ENDURING CHRISTIANS

As pointed out previously, the fact that John used the term "overcoming" in another epistle does not prove that he is using the concept in the same way in Revelation. There is nothing in the word itself that would make it a technical term having a uniquely defined meaning. Basically, the term signifies a victory that is realized, or a conquest that is made.⁶ John uses the term also of Christ and even of "the dragon." Christ declares in Rev 3:21, ". . . I also overcame." John records in Rev 5:5, "Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals." On the other hand, John writes of the beast from the sea, "And it was given to him to make war with the

⁶Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2nd ed., 539.

saints and to overcome them; and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him" (13:7). The idea of "prevailing over" is the common thought.

The idea of "overcomers" receives a two-fold thrust in Revelation. There are those within the seven churches of Asia who are challenged to overcome; there are those within the tribulation period (7:14) who are presented and upheld as overcomers. The latter seem to serve as an example and inspiration to the former. Just what is being asked of those within the seven churches?

Each of the churches has its own unique character with commendable features as well as aspects needing the Lord's rebuke (though no condemnation is made of the churches at Smyrna or Philadelphia). Following the address to each church, individuals within the respective church are challenged to rise above the problems and be faithful to the Lord. For the one who overcomes, a promise is given. As had been mentioned already, some of the promises appear to be true for all believers regardless of their spiritual condition or faithfulness (e.g., 2:11, "He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death"). On the other hand, some of the promises are not so clearly intended for all believers. In fact, other qualifying remarks within the challenge seem to link the idea of overcoming with the theme of endurance so prominent within the book, particularly endurance in the face of suffering and persecution. This idea is reflected in 2:3,9,10,13,19; 3:8,10,11. Expressions such as "you have perseverance," "have endured," "I know your tribulation," "about to suffer," "be tested," "be faithful until death," "hold fast," "your perseverance," "not denied My name," "My perseverance," and "hold fast" make it very obvious that the thought of endurance is uppermost in John's mind.

Interestingly, in only two of the churches is this theme absent, and this may be explained by their unique character. Endurance is not explicitly mentioned in regard to Sardis or Laodicea. But Sardis was the "sleeping church" which needed to wake up, and Laodicea was the "worldly church," having material abundance but lukewarm in spirit. Such churches attract little persecution, so little can be said about enduring.

Perhaps the strong link between endurance, the challenge to overcome, and a conditional promise is best reflected in Rev 2:26 regarding the church at Thyatira:

"And he who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations."

This verse clearly makes "works" essential for *overcoming* (cf. 2:5, 7b, 10). The Scriptures are clear, however, that works have nothing to do with salvation (Rom 3:28; 4:5). Salvation from sin is not the issue in this matter of "overcoming."

Is every believer an overcomer in John's thinking, or is this a conditional matter? The context (particularly the stress laid on endurance, being faithful unto death, and not denying our Lord's name) leads me to the conclusion that overcoming is a *conditional matter*. As this is set against a scenario of the tribulation saints who are martyred for their faith and refuse to worship the Antichrist or receive his mark, the idea of being an "overcomer" seems to be a very real challenge held out to the saints of the seven churches. Would they measure up in their faith and "hold fast," or would they shrink back? If this is true, then perhaps the promises are cast before them as a special reward and not an automatic guarantee for every genuine believer.

But if the promises are for the "overcomers," what do we say about Rev 2:11 and the promise not to be hurt by the second death (which is identified in 20:15 as the lake of fire)? Are those who fail to "overcome" subject to the flames of hell? Such a conclusion would certainly be theologically faulty, and at odds with the biblical doctrine of the eternal security of all believers. Notice, however, what John is not saying: John does not say that believers who do not overcome will receive the second death, i.e., the lake of fire (the same could be said about the tree of life in 2:7 and the book of life in 3:5). He only promises that the "overcomer" will not have to face the second death. That is true of all believers, and hence true for "overcomers." Although the promises may be true for all believers, John could certainly hold that out as

an encouragement for those "overcomers" who faced intense persecution.⁷ Notice what John had just said in 2:10, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer . . . Be faithful until death." How fitting that John would remind them that although death by martyrdom may touch some of them, the second death could not! I am suggesting that some of the promises to overcomers are promises for all Christians while others are true only for those who faithfully endured. It is certainly legitimate to hold out as a means of encouragement to some a promise that is true for all. The promises that were true of all Christians were good reminders to those who faced persecution and/or hardship, and hence John included them.

There is yet another reason for taking the "overcomers" in a restrictive sense, namely, the time element that comes into play. For John, overcoming is not just a one-step process, but a bearing up over a period of time . . . being loyal during the stress. This is reflected in the comments "Be faithful until death" (2:10) and "hold fast until I come" (2:25). Each of these admonitions is immediately followed by the challenge "He who overcomes . . ." John's conception of the tribulation saints also reflects a display of loyalty that extends for some season of time:

"And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death (12:11).

The position that the "overcomers" are those who are rewarded for faithful endurance must, however, answer the statement in Rev 21:7-8 that the "overcomers" inherit the new heavens and the new earth, while the ungodly are assigned to the lake of fire. The implication seems to be that there are only two groups of people, each of whom go to their own destiny. So, if the overcomers are taken to be only a segment of all believers, what is left for those believers who did not overcome?

The solution may not be as difficult as it first appears. At this point in the book, John has just provided a number of chapters describing details of the Great Tribulation. He has exhibited the saints that were persecuted and martyred during that period, and it is these who are fresh in his thinking. His purpose is not to provide every detail about the New Jerusalem nor about what every believer will be doing. His foremost concern is the blessing that awaits those who have suffered so much, and his focus is fixed on the tribulation saints. Hence, he is not addressing the issue about the future for believers who are not "overcomers," nor about those who precede the Great Tribulation. More could be said about them, but this is not germane to John's purpose of encouraging those who face martyrdom by depicting their glorious future.

This line of reasoning parallels what we find in Rev 20:4 where John mentions those who will reign with Christ for a thousand years,

"And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshipped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years."

Do we conclude from this that only the tribulation saints will reign with Christ during the millennium? Premillennialists commonly agree that many more than the tribulation saints will do so. Because he has not mentioned others does not mean that they will not also be in Christ's millennial reign. But since John's focus is upon the glorious future of these who have suffered so terribly, he writes about their part in the millennial rule of Christ. Coming to life to reign with Christ is a particular encouragement for them.

This same literary feature of "selective focusing" is utilized in Rev 21:7-8 as well. John does not provide the details of all believers who enter into the new creation. What he does ensure us of is that those who overcome shall inherit these things . . . a glorious promise.

⁷Zane Hodges has a slightly different explanation for these particular promises. He would view these as a figure of speech called *litotes*, a negative statement that understates the reality being referred to (*The Gospel Under Siege*, rev. ed. [Dallas, TX: Redención Viva, 1992], 138).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have sought to consider and understand what John meant by the concept of "overcomer" in Rev 2–3. Of the four views mentioned, the fourth makes the best sense in light of the biblical data, i.e., that John has in mind a special category of believer who because of persevering with Christ will be given special eternal rewards. The term is very closely tied to the idea of endurance, in particular persevering with loyal allegiance to Jesus Christ in the face of suffering, persecution, and especially martyrdom. Those believers who will stand faithful to Christ even at the cost of their own lives are the concern of John. For them, the promises for overcoming are very certain. Those who choose not to be faithful may jeopardize their right to such promises.

The implications of this study are significant. Christians who choose not to "hold fast" will be denied privileges when the Lord comes to sit on His glorious throne. True, they too will not face the "second death," but there is no promise for them that they will reign with Christ and be given authority to rule (cf. 2 Tim 2:12). This is one aspect of the doctrine of rewards, and apparently the consequences are serious (as we find also in the book of Hebrews!). Despite the grief upon that day, the opportunity to persevere will not be offered anew. Those who do not live as an "overcomer" will spend eternity with the consequences of their choice. As the book closes, Jesus beckons all believers, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done" (Rev 22:12).