



# **OVERCOME**

The Church's Victory In the  
Book of Revelation

Scott W. Matson

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# Introduction

Of the many themes which run through the book of Revelation, one which continually stands out is that of overcoming (or *conquering*). However, it seems this theme gets overlooked in favor of speculations about the end of the world, the identity of the Antichrist, whether or not the millennium is literal, etc. And due to the weight given these other themes, the book's purpose and message to its original audience (the seven churches in Asia Minor) often gets overlooked, if not lost entirely. And that is a tragedy, as Revelation has so much to say to readers of Scripture today. It is with this in mind that I have written this brief essay.

The call for believers to overcome stands out throughout the entire book but shows up most consistently and obviously in chapters 2-3. And this makes sense, given that these chapters are the focal point of the book; they are the chapters which address the issues and audience that occasioned its writing. Why did Jesus give John this incredible vision during his exile on the island of Patmos? To give a detailed roadmap of the end of the world? To reveal the nuances of eschatology? I don't believe so. Rather, it was to speak words of comfort, rebuke, exhortation, and hope to these seven churches in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) who were facing persecution from the outside and compromise on the inside, and to speak the same words to the Church in every age. It is within this context and understanding that we must interpret the book and its continual exhortations to overcome (as well as the rest of its content). "John's primary goal is to encourage believers to stand fast in the midst of persecution and temptation. His portrait of God, who is the Ruler of the entire universe even in the midst of tribulation, is intended to encourage perseverance among the people of God."<sup>1</sup>

With that being said, what is actually meant by "overcoming" and "conquering" in Revelation? What exactly is our risen Lord calling His Church to *do*? How are we to understand this and, for our purposes, apply it to our contemporary situation as Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Not surprisingly, the answers lie in chapters 2-3 and Jesus's exhortations to the seven churches. So, it is to those chapters that we turn.

But first, a quick note on the structure of this mini book you're reading. In part 1 I have highlighted Jesus's self-identification to each of the seven churches, since the way He identifies Himself to each church is inextricably linked to His encouragement and/or rebuke to that church, and the call to overcome which lies at the end of each exhortation. And Jesus's self-identification to each church is also linked with the grand vision of Him which John sees at the opening of the book.

This opening scene is dominated by 'the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (Titus 2:13)—we know from verse 18 that it can be none other—and the sight is literally breathtaking (verse 17). John certainly sees Him as God; he gives Him the attributes of deity by using the same kind of language that Ezekiel and Daniel use to describe God and recalls Christ's own claim in John 14:9, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father.' From this point onwards, the centrality of Christ is the ruling theme of Revelation. All things depend on their relation to Him.<sup>2</sup>

In part 2 we will look at Jesus's specific calls to overcome, given to each church, and see how those apply to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Part 3 looks at each instance of the word "overcome" throughout the book and gives a brief contextual note for the verse in which it occurs. This will help you, the reader,

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Y. Emerson, *Between the Cross and the Throne: The Book of Revelation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Transformative Word (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 40.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 41.

get a grasp of the message of overcoming as it is situated throughout the entire book. And finally, part 4 focuses on application and a conclusion.

It is my prayer that you will be edified in your walk with our risen Lord and equipped to live ever more faithfully for His glory, overcoming the soul's three enemies (the world, the flesh, and the devil), and equipped to live faithfully unto the end.

## A Note on Genre

Given the variety of views concerning the book of Revelation, I feel a brief excursus regarding its literary genre to be in order. After all, Revelation is unique among the books of the New Testament, and indeed all of Scripture. I think if we're being honest, most of us aren't exactly sure what to make of it.

Some try to solve this problem by claiming Revelation is in fact an easy and simple book to understand. In my own ecclesiastical upbringing, I was taught (incorrectly, I now believe) that Revelation is easy to understand because it is the only book of the Bible which comes with its own "divine outline." That this purported outline is based upon the assumption that the book was written to give the Church a linear history of her existence (most of which is future) was never actually proven from the text. Thus, this hermeneutic led to all sorts of fanciful interpretations, many of which are without any biblical warrant.

Others try to solve the problem by denying the book's canonicity (i.e., they try to dismiss the book as not being divinely-inspired Scripture). This errant view, however, also comes with its own baggage. Not the least of which is the fact that the Church catholic has accepted Revelation as Scripture from her earliest days.

With these considerations in mind, I believe one way of getting past the difficulties with Revelation (or at least being able to press on in spite of them) is to understand its literary genre. This can then help us discern God's intent for inspiring its writing and John's intent in recording the vision he was given.

World-renowned New Testament scholar Dr. Richard Bauckham has identified three genres into which Revelation fits.<sup>3</sup> They are: *apocalypse*, *prophecy*, and *letter*. "Thus Revelation seems to be an apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a circular letter to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia."<sup>4</sup> I'll quickly go through these three terms and explain what they mean. It is my hope that this will help you get a better grasp on just what God is communicating to His people through the book of Revelation.

### ***Apocalypse***

In Greek, the book's title is *apokalypsis*, from which we get our English word apocalypse. But in ancient Greek, the word did not carry the same connotations as our word does today. When we think of "the apocalypse," or something being referred to as "apocalyptic," we usually think of the end of the world, calamity and disaster, death, etc. And while some of those elements are indeed present in the imagery throughout the book, that was not the point of writing an apocalypse.

Rather, apocalypse in ancient Greek simply meant an "unveiling." That's why the book is called *Revelation* in English; it's purpose is to *reveal*. So then, reveal what? One of the primary things the book is intended to reveal is the way Christians can live as faithful disciples of Jesus in the midst of an empire and culture which is opposed to His rule and His way.

One of the primary reasons John was shown the vision was to give him a new, heavenly perspective on the situation facing the Church (persecution from both Jews and Romans as well as moral and doctrinal compromise), and to call her to remain faithful in spite of the opposition she was facing. This sort of perspective-shift was common in ancient apocalyptic writing.

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<sup>3</sup> The information in this section has been adapted from Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1-17.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

## ***Prophecy***

The Revelation was always intended to be read aloud in the corporate gathering of God's people, and in this way serves as a prophecy. In fact, in verse 3 of chapter 1 there is a blessing pronounced over the one who reads this book and those who hear it read. I believe that is a reference to how the book was to be read in each church: out loud in corporate worship.

Now, due to many historical factors, when we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century hear the word prophecy, we tend to immediately think of the end of the world and a foretelling of future events. And while future events are certainly an aspect of biblical prophecy, they do not make up the bulk of it.

Rather, the primary focus and aim of biblical prophecy all throughout the Scriptures is to reveal God's work to God's people, and to call His people to faithfulness to Himself. To see this in action, read any of the Old Testament prophets. You'll quickly see that their primary message was to call Israel (God's old covenant people) to repent of their sin and walk faithfully with Him. And this is what the book of Revelation is primarily doing.<sup>5</sup>

"[John's] task is to proclaim the fulfillment of what God had revealed to the prophets of the past."<sup>6</sup> John is communicating that everything prophesied in the Old Testament—God's plan in Christ—was being fulfilled. And in light of this, believers are to live ready for the Lord's return. It is these aspects of prophecy which most concerned John; not giving a detailed roadmap of God's end-times plan.

## ***Letter***

The fact that Revelation is a letter, addressed to seven specific churches, cannot be over-emphasized. In our zeal to decipher the strange imagery and difficult language, we often forget that this book was originally written to seven churches, full of believers in the first century. *And the book was initially meant for them.*

The way Revelation gets interpreted so often in our day renders it basically meaningless to all but those who will be alive when Christ returns. But we cannot interpret God's Word in this way. If our understanding of Revelation (or any book/passage of Scripture) causes us to think it's really only relevant to us, and not to the original recipients or most believers throughout the Church's history, we've interpreted it incorrectly. And this is why I'm writing this note about genre.

Many have taught the book in such a way that the vast majority of it would have been irrelevant and meaningless to its original recipients and everyone but us throughout Church history, since we are constantly told we are living in the "last days" (and perhaps we are, but that's a different discussion). I'm arguing that that way of reading Scripture is neither faithful to the text nor the correct the way to understand and interpret it. God's word is relevant and meaningful for all of us who are His redeemed people in Christ in every age. Thus, it is imperative we understand that Revelation was written to real people, in specific churches, at the close of the first century. *The meaning we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century get from the book must be based on that understanding.*

With all of that being said, let's turn now to the text of Revelation and get a good grasp on God's call to us to walk faithfully with Him, and thus overcome the soul's three enemies.

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<sup>5</sup> There certainly are aspects of the future and future events in Revelation. I'm not denying that. However, my argument is that those events are not the central focus or purpose of the book.

<sup>6</sup> Bauckham, 4.

# Part 1 – The Titles of Jesus

In this section, I focus on the specific way Jesus identifies Himself to each of the churches. One thing you will notice is that each self-identification is related to the encouragement and rebuke He gives to each church. In other words, who He is forms the foundation of the Church's faithfulness and behavior in this world.

## *The Angels of the Churches*

I want to add a note here about who or what the “angels” are to whom each of these seven letters are addressed. In Greek, the word *angelōs* (from which we get our word angel) means “messenger.” There are of course many examples in Scripture of this word referring to literal angels, but there are also many other occasions when this word refers to human messengers. Thus there is a wide range of opinion on who these “angels” are in chapters 2-3 of Revelation, and the answer is not as obvious as it may seem at first. While there are many different nuances within the majority opinions, there really are only two primary views. I'll mention them here and briefly go through them.

First, there is the view that these “angels” are actual angels. What this view has going for it is that every other use of the Greek word *angelōs* in the book, outside of chapters 2-3, is speaking of literal angels. Also, angelic beings were very common in apocalyptic literature, and thus would not be out of place here. How this works out practically is to think of each of the seven churches as having an angelic messenger who “represents” it in God's throne room. And while this sounds strange to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, it would not be all that strange in the world of the Bible. We see many passages in Scripture where God is surrounded by an angelic “council.”<sup>7</sup> We see, after all, a much more vibrant and active spiritual realm in Scripture than most of us are normally aware of. Additionally, who pours out God's wrath on the world in the series of seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments? Seven angels. Many believe that this typifies the angels which represent the seven churches as pouring out God's judgment upon their persecutors. This makes sense given the overall message of the book, that God will vindicate His people and judge their enemies; the believers are called to stay faithful while they await God's righteous work on their behalf.

Second, there is the view that these “angels” are human leaders of the churches; most commonly that they are simply the pastors of the churches. This view makes better sense out of the exhortations in the letters themselves. After all, Jesus is surely calling the leader(s) and members of the churches to repent, rather than calling angelic representatives to repent.<sup>8</sup> This view also makes more sense of the historical realities surrounding the book of Revelation; these letters were meant to be delivered to each of the churches. There is not a way for John (or anyone else) to deliver a letter to an angelic being.

So then, what's the answer? Ultimately, I don't know. While I lean toward the “angels” of the churches being human leaders (pastors/elders), like other aspects of Revelation I have to leave this open to mystery. And this is actually a blessing, because it reminds all of us that the point of Revelation is not to decipher all of the imagery and put it together in a neat package. Rather, the point is to learn

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<sup>7</sup> This is popularly known as the “Divine Council Worldview” in Scripture. For more on this fascinating topic, see the following: “Divine Council,” Timothy Mackie, Bible Project, last modified March 14, 2019, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/divine-council/> and Michael Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> “Are the ‘Angels of the Seven Churches’ Human Leaders?” Andrew Wilson, Think Theology, last modified May 23, 2018, accessed August 4, 2023, <https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/are-the-angels-of-the-seven-churches-human-leaders>



how to stay faithful to Jesus in the midst of a society which is growing increasingly hostile to Him and His way. That we take the exhortations to the churches to heart is far more important than that we figure out exactly who these messengers are.

With that said, let's turn now to the titles of Jesus addressed to the seven churches themselves.

### **To the Church in Ephesus**

**“The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand and who walks among the seven golden lampstands.”**

This is a call-back to chapter one, where John sees Jesus, the sovereign Lord and God, holding the seven stars (the messengers of the seven churches) in His right hand (a biblical symbol of authority and power) and walking among the seven lampstands (the seven churches). This is a powerful declaration of Jesus's deity and authority. The Church is the new covenant people of God, and Jesus here is identifying Himself as the One with all authority over the Church and who holds her in His almighty hand. As Paul wrote, Jesus is the Head of the Church (Colossians 1:18), and to have all authority over God's people means Jesus is God and Lord.

Jesus warns them that if they do not return to their first love,<sup>9</sup> He will “remove their lampstand.” That's His way of saying He will come in judgment and shut their church down. And this reminds us that while Jesus is full of grace and is so loving, He is also the Sovereign of the universe who is infinitely holy and just.

### **To the Church in Smyrna**

**“The First and the Last, the One who was dead and came to life.”**

“The First and the Last” is a declaration of deity, as Jesus is identifying Himself as the LORD God, who made this declaration in Isaiah 44:6-8. Jesus here is declaring Himself to be Yahweh, the only true God and Redeemer! And He proved that to be true by rising from the dead (because who could conquer death but the Author of life?), which is part of His self-identification here.

Jesus commends them for their faithfulness in the midst of persecution and warns them that more persecution is coming. And then He encourages them to continue to persevere. For although they may die during the persecution, they will be raised to eternal life if they remain faithful, just as Jesus did the Father's will and was raised on the third day.

### **To the Church in Pergamum**

**“The One who has the sharp, double-edged sword.”**

Jesus's self-identification here is a call-back to chapter 1, verse 16, where John says he saw Jesus having a sharp, double-edged sword which came from His mouth. This is part of the vision of Jesus which John experiences, seeing Him in His full glory and majesty in Heaven's throne room. By identifying Himself to the church in Pergamum in this way, Jesus is declaring His power and majesty—linked with John's vision of Him in 1:16—to this church.

The sword refers to the word of God. Jesus is saying that He speaks God's word perfectly, because He does not only speak it, but He *possesses* it. It comes from Him because He is God. This is also a reminder that Jesus has all authority in His Church, precisely because it's His word which is

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<sup>9</sup> Scholars are divided over what it means that the Ephesian Christians had “left their first love.” Some believe it means their love for God. Others that it refers to Christian love for one another. Still others believe it's a reference to love for their non-believing neighbors in Ephesus. Likely, Jesus' rebuke encompasses all of these options. The point is that this church, although it had maintained doctrinal fidelity (for which Jesus praises them), had become hard and cold, not being energized and characterized by God's love. And this is a condition that Jesus will not tolerate.

binding upon it. Additionally, John is reminding us of the first chapter of His Gospel—Jesus is the Word incarnate (John 1:1, 1:14) who has given us His word written (Scripture).

Jesus threatens to come and make war with those in this church who are teaching and encouraging idolatry and sexual immorality (two sins which continually plagued Israel and for which God judged them). How will He fight against the trouble-makers? With the sharp sword which proceeds from His mouth. God’s word is powerful, for through it He exercises His lordship over His people, the Church.

### **To the Church in Thyatira**

“The Son of God, the One whose eyes are like a fiery flame and whose feet are like fine bronze.”

“Son of God” is a declaration of His deity and authority. Jesus is the *only* Son of the Father. His eyes like a fiery flame and His feet like fine bronze is a call-back to the vision of God’s glory, when the prophet Ezekiel saw Someone who looked like a human, seated on God’s throne! This depicts Jesus in His glory and splendor. Also, in Romans 1, Paul wrote that Jesus was “declared the Son of God in power, through the resurrection of the dead.” Jesus’s self-identification here is indeed a powerful declaration that He is the Son of God!

Jesus gives a striking picture of His majesty precisely because He wants to encourage the faithful and warn the unfaithful. This exhortation to the church in Thyatira reads very much like Old Testament prophetic language—there is both encouragement and rebuke, and those receiving it must take it seriously. The language is a call-back to the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Elisha, and how they called Israel to return to faithfulness to God, in contrast to the wicked woman Jezebel who supported pagan religious practices and persecuted God’s people. In fact, John refers to this woman by the name of Jezebel. And while it is possible that was her given name, it’s more likely that Jesus called her such because she was embodying her evil name-sake. Jesus promises to punish this woman and those who have adopted her false teachings.<sup>10</sup>

### **To the Church in Sardis**

“The One who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars.”

This is a call-back to 1:4, where we see the “seven Spirits of God” (or, the sevenfold Spirit of God). What is this about? First, as Revelation is apocalyptic literature, numbers have symbolic significance. The number seven pictures perfection, wholeness, and completion.

Second, this is a foreshadowing of Rev. 4:5 and 5:6, where the seven Spirits of God are pictured as seven fiery torches before His throne, and also as the horns (authority) and eyes (awareness/omniscience) of the Lamb, who is Jesus. This is Jesus referring both to the fact that He has the Holy Spirit in fullness and that He has all authority and omniscience, because He is God and Lord of all.

What about referring to God’s “seven spirits?” Isn’t there only one Holy Spirit? Indeed there is! This is a reference back to Isaiah 11:2, where the Holy Spirit is talked about at the beginning of the verse and then described with six characteristics. That’s a sevenfold reference to the Holy Spirit. And in verse 1 of Isaiah 11, we see a prophecy about Jesus. Thus, Jesus is identifying Himself as the promised Messiah (the Branch of Isaiah 11:1), the One in whom God’s Spirit dwells with no limit (without measure, John 3:34).

### **To the Church in Philadelphia**

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<sup>10</sup> The information in this paragraph has been adapted from Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 66.

“The holy One, the true One, the One who has the key of David, who opens, and no one will close, and who closes, and no one opens.”

The Holy One is again a reference to Jesus’s deity, as He is identifying Himself as the Holy One of Israel, a common Old Testament title for God. The True One also references the fact that God alone is true—and Jesus is the Truth (John 14:6).

The One who has the key of David is a reference back to Isaiah 22:20-25, where the key of David symbolizes authority to rule God’s Kingdom. Jesus alone is the true King, and He rules over His Kingdom with absolute authority and sovereignty—He alone “opens and closes,” a symbol of authority.

The language used here by Jesus is meant both to encourage and to motivate.<sup>11</sup> Open doors speak of the Philadelphians’ entrance into the eternal Kingdom, but they also refer to opportunities for service. This little church, so beleaguered by persecution and opposition, is encouraged to persevere and continue in faithful service to Christ, because the Kingdom is their eternal destiny. “So they are doubly encouraged, for Christ who nullifies the opposition also magnifies the opportunity. The door has been opened by Him, and none can shut it. Let them again take heart and use the strength they do have in the service He sets before them.”<sup>12</sup>

### To the Church in Laodicea

“The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Ruler of God’s creation.”

“Laodicea has the grim distinction of being the only church of which the risen Christ has nothing good to say.”<sup>13</sup> A sobering condemnation, and an urgent call to repent. Of the seven churches to whom this letter (the book of Revelation) was addressed, the church in Laodicea was certainly the most well-off in an earthly sense. But they were also the most spiritually impoverished. And that dichotomy is not uncommon.

Jesus’s self-identification here is a call-back to 1:5.

The promise of a new creation by the faithful God of Israel in Isaiah 65:15–16 primarily stands behind the title “the Amen, the faithful and true,” as well as behind the concluding “the beginning of the creation of God.” The notion of God and of Israel as a “faithful witness” to the new creation in Isaiah 43:10–12 forms the background for “witness.” These OT allusions are used to indicate that Christ is the true Israel and the divine “Amen, the faithful and true witness” to his own resurrection as “the beginning of the new creation of God,” in inaugurated fulfillment of the Isaianic new creation prophecies.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, Jesus’s resurrection is seen by the biblical authors as the inauguration of a “new creation,” the fulfillment of those prophecies from the Old Testament. This is so because Jesus’s resurrection was the turning point in history which brought about the new covenant, and the “new thing” that God is now doing (Isaiah 43:19).

Jesus also reminds the Laodiceans that He is the fulfillment of God’s promises in the Old Testament (2 Cor. 1:20), the One who only speaks what is true, and the One with all authority over

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<sup>11</sup> The information in this paragraph has been adapted from Wilcock, 56.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>13</sup> William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 3rd ed. fully rev. and updated., vol. 1, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 149.

<sup>14</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 297.

creation. He's reminding them of His sovereignty because He is going to rebuke them harshly and wants them to repent.

## Part 2 – The Seven Letters

### **To the Church in Ephesus** (Revelation 2:1-7)

This church had remained faithful doctrinally and, on the outside, looked like a healthy, good church. And Jesus does commend them for these things. However, there was a problem: they had drifted away from their “first love.” What exactly does this mean? Commentators and Bible teachers differ on what they think this is referring to, but basically it means they were a church characterized by a lack of love. As good as their theology was, they had become cold. Jesus exhorts them to repent and return to their first love: to fulfill the two greatest commandments. They needed to return to a love for God and a love for neighbor (see Matthew 22:37-40).

And it is in this context that Jesus makes this wonderful promise: “**To the one who conquers**, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7, CSB, emphasis mine). Do you see it? To conquer, in this context, means to repent of sin and obey Jesus’s commands. It’s referring to faithfulness to God and obedience to His word.

### **To the Church in Smyrna** (Revelation 2:8-11)

The church in Smyrna was small, but mighty. These believers were facing intense persecution from diabolically-motivated Jews in their community. Jesus promises the crown of life, a victor’s crown, to those who remain faithful in the midst of persecution to the point of death. This was a beleaguered group of Christians whom Jesus commended for their faithfulness. And He had no rebuke to give them. Persecution can do that; it tends to have a purifying effect on the Church. When things are difficult, we tend to focus on faithfulness to Christ. It’s when things are easy that we can, if not careful, begin to coast and rest on our laurels.

Jesus promises these believers that whoever conquers will never be hurt by the second death (a reference to Hell, the lake of fire in 20:14). What does it mean to conquer in this situation? It means to remain faithful to Jesus in spite of persecution, and to hold onto your testimony no matter the cost, even if it means death for your faith in Him. This is what it means to conquer, and Jesus promises great reward to those who remain faithful to Him in this way!

### **To the Church in Pergamum** (Revelation 2:12-17)

This church was also facing persecution in an idolatrous, pagan city. They lived in a difficult, hostile environment and Jesus exhorts them to remain faithful in the midst of the persecution which confronted them. However, these believers had also allowed false teaching and sinful living into their church fellowship. Jesus exhorts them to conquer, and I believe this has a two-fold meaning in this circumstance.

First, to conquer means to remain faithful to Jesus and keep your testimony of Him in the face of persecution, even to the point of death. And second, for this church, to conquer also means *to remain faithful in the midst of false teaching and compromised morality*. In other words, Jesus is exhorting these believers, the ones who had remained faithful doctrinally, to continue to be faithful in their doctrine *and* practice and to rebuke and expel the false teaching and sinful practices that some in their midst had adopted (see 1 Corinthians 5 for a comparable passage addressed to another church).

There is great reward promised to those Christians who remain faithful to Jesus in their doctrine and lifestyle, as well as in the face of persecution and death. *To conquer means to remain faithful.*

### **To the Church in Thyatira** (Revelation 2:18-29)

The church in Thyatira was a church of contrasts. Jesus commends them for their service, love, and faithfulness, things which characterize any healthy church! Yet at the same time, like the

church in Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 5), they had tolerated false teaching and sexual immorality, and this sin had spread like leaven throughout this body of believers.

There was a false prophesies in this church, and Jesus calls her Jezebel (see 1 Kings 16, 19, and 21 for an overview of Jezebel's life and reputation). One commentator described Jezebel in this way: "Powerful, influential, intellectual, beautiful, but wicked, she sold herself to work evil, and spent her life in fighting against God and His cause."<sup>15</sup> Hardly a ringing endorsement. She truly was one of the most wicked people described in all of Scripture, and yet this church was tolerating a woman who was committing the exact same sins (imagine Jesus calling your pastor 'Judas' and threatening to make war with him).

This woman in Thyatira was promoting "the way of Balaam" (see Numbers 22-24). Balaam was a pagan sorcerer who led the Israelites into horrific sin by telling Balak, the king of Moab, that if he sent Moabite girls into the Israelite camp, the Israelite men would engage in sexual relations with them, worship their false gods, and so bring God's wrath and judgment upon themselves (Numbers 31:16). Apparently, this woman in Thyatira was doing the same thing. She was teaching God's people to commit sexual immorality and eat meat sacrificed to idols, an act which identified the eater as a worshipper of whatever god the meat had been sacrificed to (see 1 Corinthians 8 and 10). She was promoting sexual immorality and idolatry, the two besetting sins of Israel, in the Church. And if you know your Old Testament, you know that God judged His people harshly for those sins all through their history.

So, Jesus gives a stern warning: cast this woman and those allied with her out of the church or Jesus will come, make war with them, and purge the evil Himself. In the midst of this, Jesus calls the faithful in Thyatira to conquer. What does this mean? It means to remain faithful to Jesus in the midst of the compromise which had infected their church and to not partake in the sins of those who were committing these evils. To stay separate from evil, worldliness, and compromise and to remain faithful to Jesus is one way in which we conquer and overcome.

### **To the Church in Sardis** (Revelation 3:1-6)

The church in Sardis received the harshest evaluation of the seven churches. Other than point out a few faithful people in the congregation, Jesus had nothing positive to say to them. They were steeped in compromise, lukewarmness, and unfaithfulness. Jesus said that the majority in this church had defiled their garments, an image in Scripture for polluting that which is holy with those things that defile, make dirty, and bring pollution and impurity.

Jesus calls them to repent of their sin and forsake compromise, and to walk faithfully with Him. He tells them that the deposit of faith they have received is about to die, because the practice of sin in one's life corrupts and kills faith (see Galatians 5:16-26 and 6:8). These people are in grave spiritual danger.

Jesus calls them to conquer, which in this exhortation means to repent, strengthen the faith that remains, and walk faithfully with Him once again.

### **To the Church in Philadelphia** (Revelation 3:7-13)

To this church Jesus gives no rebuke. They were staying faithful to Him in the midst of intense persecution, apparently from some in the unbelieving Jewish community (see verse 9). He promises that He will vindicate them in the sight of their persecutors and reminds them of the great reward that will be theirs if they remain faithful.

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<sup>15</sup> "Jezebel," Mary Elizabeth Baxter, *Blue Letter Bible*, accessed January 17, 2023, [https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/baxter\\_mary/WitW/WitW23\\_Jezebel.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/baxter_mary/WitW/WitW23_Jezebel.cfm)

The one exhortation He gives them is to “hold on to what you have, so that no one takes your crown” (verse 11). This is followed by His wonderful promise to those who conquer: He will make them permanent fixtures in His eternal presence and give them a permanent home in His Kingdom. How could their crowns be “taken”? If they gave into the persecution and forsook Christ, they would lose their crowns and become part of the unbelieving community who was perpetrating the persecution. And Jesus will not tolerate that kind of betrayal and apostasy. The apostle Paul, writing to this church a few decades earlier (see the book of Philippians), had given them a similar exhortation: stand firm in the faith and don’t be moved by those persecuting you (see Phil. 1:27-30).

Thus, in context, the call to conquer for the church in Philadelphia is to continue to remain faithful in the midst of persecution. Notice that the call was not to amass political power and reverse the unjust persecution they were facing. Nor was it to try and curry social or cultural favor to be more accepted by the hostile Jewish community. Rather, it was to remain faithful and hang onto the deposit of faith which had been entrusted to them.

Jesus calls His followers in every age to maintain their prophetic/critical voice in the culture. Such faithfulness is necessary if the Church is to be the conscience of society, both loving and also rebuking the culture for its sins and calling its people to faith in Jesus.

### **To the Church in Laodicea** (Revelation 3:14-22)

Who hasn’t heard of the church in Laodicea? This church has become something of a byword in church circles, representing lukewarmness and compromise and serving as a warning to nominal and backslidden believers. And rightly so, as Jesus compares their spiritual state to tepid, flat, disgusting water. What happened to this church is that they had become worthless and useless in the Kingdom.

Contextually, the city of Laodicea had hot water that flowed into it from a source which was situated some distance from the city; and thus, by the time the water arrived in Laodicea, it was lukewarm. By contrast, Hierapolis and Colossae, two cities nearby, had hot water and cold water respectively, and Jesus seems to be referencing this fact to make His point. Both kinds of water (hot and cold) are useful and necessary for human flourishing, and contrary to much preaching, being “cold” in this context was not a bad thing.<sup>16</sup> After all, Jesus was addressing *Christians* in this rebuke, and it is difficult to imagine that He would prefer His own to be completely dead spiritually (cold), rather than lukewarm (saved but carnal or apathetic). Thus, both “hot” and “cold” are viewed in this passage as positive.<sup>17</sup>

The *deeds* of this church are summed up in the accusation *you are neither cold nor hot*. The imagery may be derived from the water-supply of the city which appears to have been drawn from hot springs at some distance, so that it arrived at the city lukewarm. This forms a contrast with the hot springs at nearby Hierapolis and the cold, refreshing water at Colossae. Hot water heals, cold water refreshes, but lukewarm water is useless for either purpose, and can serve only as an emetic [a substance which causes vomiting].<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> There is a valid way to look at “coldness” in a spiritual sense (deadness, unbelief) as being preferable to lukewarmness (a profession of faith without fruit, characterized by apathy). However, I believe too much is made of this in modern preaching and neglects the historical circumstances of the recipients of Jesus’s rebuke in Laodicea.

<sup>17</sup> Beale, 303.

<sup>18</sup> Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 84.

The problem, however, is that lukewarm water was useless and gross. And in the case of the Laodiceans, the lukewarm water which flowed into their city caused nausea.<sup>19</sup> That's the way Jesus characterizes this church. They were swimming in money and material goods, overflowing with prosperity and abundance, and were living lives of ease and luxury without persecution. Isn't that the American dream!? Yet their spirits were impoverished and their lack of commitment and faithfulness to Him made Him sick, just like the tepid water which flowed into the city.

Jesus calls them to conquer, which in this particular exhortation means to repent of their lukewarmness. Rather than place their trust in their material possessions and financial abundance, they were being called to take up their cross, deny themselves, and follow Him faithfully.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor who was martyred by the Nazis in World War II, wrote a wonderful book entitled *The Cost of Discipleship* which deals with what faithfulness to Jesus looks like. In it he wrote the following:

The followers [of Jesus] are the visible community of faith; their discipleship is a visible act which separates them from the world—or it is not discipleship. And discipleship is as visible as light in the night, as a mountain in the flatland. To flee into invisibility is to deny the call. **Any community of Jesus which wants to be invisible is no longer a community that follows Him.**<sup>20</sup> (emphasis mine)

In addition to the brilliant quote above, Bonhoeffer also wrote the following: “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.”<sup>21</sup> His invitation to them was to come in and commune; would they take Him up on it? Will you?

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<sup>19</sup> Beale, 303.

<sup>20</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 113.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.



## Part 3 – Overcoming in Chapters 4-22

We've seen Jesus's exhortations to the seven churches (the letter's original audience) to overcome and have looked at what that means in each specific context. Now we're going to examine each instance throughout the rest of the book where overcoming or conquering is mentioned—and compare and contrast how these words function in relation to the Church and the forces of evil—in order that we might get a full-orbed picture of just what this means for us as believers in Jesus.

**5:5** *“Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep. Look, the Lion from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered so that He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.’”*

The elder tells the apostle John not to weep, for Jesus has conquered. How did Jesus conquer? By dying for His people and rising from death, **and thus perfectly fulfilling the Father's will while on earth.** Jesus perfectly demonstrates what it means to conquer—to do God's will, no matter the cost.

**6:1-2** *“Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there was a white horse. Its rider held a bow; a crown was given to him, and he went out as a conqueror in order to conquer.”*

In this instance, conquering is presented as something which involves might and power. Keep in mind that this is one of God's righteous judgments on an evil world, and not an exhortation to the Church to conquer through means of power and force.

**11:7** *“When they [the two witnesses] finish their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war on them, conquer them, and kill them.”*

We see here one of the primary manifestations of evil conquering. And how does evil (temporarily) conquer? Through violence. God does not call His people to conquer and overcome in this way (violence, force, and power), but rather to conquer by being faithful to Him, loving Him more than their own lives, and loving even their enemies who persecute them. In contrast to the forces of evil, we don't conquer by overcoming our enemies with force, but rather with love and selflessness.<sup>22</sup>

**12:11** *“They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; for they did not love their lives to the point of death.”<sup>23</sup>*

The saints overcome and decisively conquer the devil. How? By the blood of Jesus and by holding firmly to their faith in Him, even at the cost of their lives. This is how we, as Christians, are called to overcome as well! **This is perhaps the central verse in Revelation which speaks of the Church's victory over evil.**

And here's the amazing thing about the saints' victory in this passage: when we're willing to lose our lives, we cannot be defeated! We believe that death is not the end but is simply the transition into true and eternal life. Therefore, the worst the enemy and this world can do is kill us. But in view of eternity, that's not a defeat for us, but victory! God's wisdom is truly unmatched.

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<sup>22</sup> God does, in the end, overcome evil and conquer His remaining enemies with force near the end of Revelation. However, God alone is righteous and holy, and His judgments, in contrast with ours and with the forces of evil, are good and true. God can justly conquer with the force of His power. We cannot.

<sup>23</sup> I recommend you listen to the song entitled “Overcome” by Jeremy Camp.

**12:17** *“So the dragon was furious with the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep the commands of God and hold firmly to the testimony about Jesus.”*

The enemy cannot defeat God or the woman,<sup>24</sup> so he goes off to try and destroy the rest of her offspring—all who believe in Jesus and fear Him by keeping His commands. Here, John identifies true Christians as those who keep God’s commands (covenant-faithfulness) and hold faithfully to the truth of Jesus no matter the cost (believing loyalty). Christianity is more than an intellectual assent to certain facts. It is a way of life, obedience to the triune God. After all, Jesus said clearly that the one who has His commands **and keeps them** is the one who loves Him (John 14:21). And this fact becomes very obvious when persecution arises.

**13:10** *“If anyone is to be taken captive, into captivity he goes. If anyone is to be killed with a sword, with a sword he will be killed. This calls for endurance and faithfulness from the saints.”*

The endurance and faithfulness of the saints called for and described in this verse looks like the Church being faithful to Jesus, even unto death. Many Christians around the world (outside of the West) face literal death for their faithfulness to Jesus. Many others face imprisonment. We should be praying for them, remembering those in chains as if we were imprisoned with them (Hebrews 13:3).

Also, formal persecution is not outside the realm of possibility for us even in the Western World.<sup>25</sup> Are we prepared to follow Jesus into a prison cell, or even the executioner’s block, if that be the path He chooses for us to walk?

**14:12** *“This calls for endurance from the saints, who keep God’s commands and their faith in Jesus.”*

The verses directly preceding this one talk about believers remaining faithful to Jesus, and not worshiping the beast or receiving his mark. Staying faithful marks these believers for certain death. But this is the endurance of the saints, choosing faithfulness to Jesus over ease, freedom, and life itself. Also, this is a call for believers to give up financial security in the midst of a godless empire, seeing as how no one could buy or sell without the beast’s mark. Are we ready to lose our prosperity for the sake of faithfulness to Jesus, as so many of our fellow Christians have done over the millennia?

**15:2** *“I also saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had won the victory over the beast, its image, and the number of its name, were standing on the sea of glass with harps from God.”*

Who are the ones who, in John’s vision, stand on the glassy sea in God’s presence with instruments of worship? Those who overcome the beast by staying faithful to Jesus even at the cost of their own lives. Notice the wording: they “had won victory over the beast.” By staying faithful to Jesus, we win victory over the diabolical forces in the world.

**16:15** *“Look, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who is alert and remains clothed so that he may not go around naked, and people see his shame.”*

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<sup>24</sup> Given that Revelation was written in the genre of “apocalyptic” literature, the woman is symbolic. Many think she represents Mary while others believe she represents the nation of Israel. While I believe her to be Mary, the point of the passage is not to decipher exactly who she is, but rather that Jesus became incarnate through her and that the rest of her offspring are the followers of Jesus—part of the “Seed of the woman” from Genesis 3.

<sup>25</sup> By “Western World” I’m referring to those nations which compose the European Union, as well as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.

Here, Jesus speaks of those who remain clothed (or guard their clothes)<sup>26</sup> as the ones who are blessed. This is a call-back to Jesus's words to the church in Sardis in 3:5 and His threat of punishment to the evil-doers. Those who hold fast to Jesus in word and deed, and don't partake of evil, will be those who are clothed in robes of righteousness.

In Scripture (and both ancient and modern "honor/shame" cultures), shame was a tool used to help enforce community standards and expectations. The threat of public shame was often a strong enough force to motivate people to continue behaving in accordance with the community's ethos. And while this may seem strange to Western readers, it's perfectly normal and understood by Eastern cultures (and was clearly understood by the authors of Scripture).

People in the ancient Mediterranean world likewise used shame, just as they used honor, as a tool to enforce and reinforce their collective group's values. The biblical writers were well aware of the power of collective shame. Sometimes they use it, and sometimes they challenge its misuse. In both cases, Westerners may struggle to see what's happening.<sup>27</sup>

Jesus does just this: He uses the threat of shame—public nakedness (a very shameful thing in the ancient Near East)—as a way to motivate His people to guard their faith and not drift away.

**17:6** *"Then I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly astonished."*

The beast and the woman represent ungodly political, social, cultural, and religious systems which persecute and kill God's people, the Church. In the context of the entire book, this ghastly image is given to encourage Christians to overcome the beast, the woman, and the worldly systems they represent by remaining faithful to Jesus no matter the cost.

**18:24** *"In her was found the blood of prophets and saints, and of all those slaughtered on the earth."*

God's people throughout history have always been persecuted by Babylon. Babylon was, of course, a literal city, full of iniquity and which persecuted God's people. In Revelation, it also represents all of the forces of evil throughout history which seek to usurp God's rule and destroy His people.

**20:4** *"Then I saw thrones, and people seated on them who were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the Word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and who had not accepted the mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years."*

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<sup>26</sup> The literal translation of the Greek for "the one who...remains clothed" is actually "the one who guards/keeps his clothes." The idea is that as believers, we must be on guard and diligent that we don't drift from the truth of the Gospel and from righteous living. See 2 Corinthians 7:1, Hebrews 2:1-4, and 1 Peter 5:8 (among many other passages) for further guidance on this.

It also brings up a very important point, and one which runs throughout the book of Revelation: we have a responsibility to pursue holiness and maintain loyalty to Jesus. If we don't do these things, we have no reason to believe we will be saved on the final day (Hebrews 12:14). This does not in any way contradict the fact that our salvation is by God's grace alone, or that we are kept by God's grace and faithfulness. Rather, God's faithfulness and our responsibility are two sides of the same coin.

<sup>27</sup> E. Randolph Richards and Richard James, *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes: Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 175.

Those who overcame and were given the right to reign with Jesus are those who did not give in but remained faithful to Him no matter the cost. If we remain faithful for the (relatively) short duration of our lives here on earth, we will experience the everlasting bliss of communion with God.

**21:7** *“The one who conquers will inherit these things, and I will be his God, and he will be My son.”*

The promise that those who endure to the end will be saved is reminiscent of Jesus’s words to His apostles in Matthew 10:22.

**22:7** *“Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”*

A final exhortation, in light of Jesus’s return and all that Scripture promises, to remain faithful to Him no matter what!

When we are faced with the threat of martyrdom, the prospect of economic ruin, or even ridicule for our Christian faith from the larger culture, Revelation reminds us that, in spite of the uncomfortable or even dire nature of our present circumstances, the good and sovereign Trinitarian God is working all things together for good for those who love him.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, this is the great promise of Scripture and the hope we have as God’s redeemed people. He is sovereign over all things, and He is working out every circumstance, both good and bad, for His glory, the accomplishment of His purposes, and the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

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<sup>28</sup> Emerson, 19.

## Part 4 – Application and Conclusion

There are several themes which run throughout the book of Revelation, this letter to seven churches in Asia Minor. As we've seen, one of the primary themes is that of overcoming/conquering. God calls us, His redeemed people (the Church), to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil. The apostle John, who wrote the Gospel of John, as well as 1, 2, and 3 John,<sup>29</sup> touches on this theme a lot in his writings. And we have seen that in Revelation, the kind of overcoming God calls His people to is faithfulness to Him in the face of temptation, persecution, and death, and that the victory He promises us is the privilege of dwelling with Him forever.

### Overcoming the Soul's Three Enemies

We have seen that the way we overcome the world is not through the acquisition of political and social power, having “friends in high places,” and other things normally associated with influence and prominence. Rather, we overcome the world by prophetically calling it to task for its wickedness and staying faithful to Jesus. In fact, remaining faithful to our Lord is one way we fulfill our call to be a prophetic witness against the world's evil.

What about the flesh? What does Revelation have to say about that? As we saw in the letters to the churches, we overcome the flesh through repentance, the mortification (putting to death) of sin, and staying occupied with Kingdom work.

And how do we overcome the devil? We overcome him by holding fast to our profession of faith in Jesus, fearing Him and keeping His commands, and loving Him more than we love our own lives.

It is these lessons we learn from this letter. What a powerful exhortation this was to the seven churches, and also to you and me! The book of Revelation contains magnificent lessons and brings great blessing to those who, in every age of the Church, read and obey its words (see the promise attached to the book in 1:3).

### The Garden of Eden, Trees, and the End of All Things

Another wonderful thing about this book is how it ties in perfectly with the book of Genesis and the Garden of Eden.<sup>30</sup> In Eden were the trees of life and the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve lost their right to partake of the tree of life at the Fall—they did not overcome by being faithful to God in the face of the serpent's temptation—rather, they gave in.

But remember what Jesus promised the Ephesian Christians—to the one who overcomes (the serpent's temptations), He will give the right to eat from the tree of life in the new heavens and earth! Jesus's sacrifice on Calvary's tree and His resurrection has restored to His people, who remain faithful, the right to the tree of life!<sup>31</sup> And this is because Jesus overcame. He did not give in to the serpent's temptations (Matthew 4, Mark 1, Luke 4), but was perfectly faithful to the Father.

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<sup>29</sup> There is much debate in biblical scholarship regarding the author of Revelation. Many believe this was a different John. I believe (for many reasons) the author to be the apostle John, and that is the assumption from which I've written this essay.

<sup>30</sup> This makes sense, as Jesus has restored to us all that Adam lost when he sinned (Romans 5:12-21). The story of Revelation, and indeed of the entire Bible, is the story of what God has done to redeem His elect.

All throughout Scripture, certain themes and motifs pop up which are meant to call our minds back to some other portion of the Word. This is true with Garden/Tree theme: we see it in Genesis, at Calvary, and in the new heavens and earth.

<sup>31</sup> I recommend you listen to the song entitled “Eden (Isn't It Just Like You?)” by Benjamin William Hastings.

Therefore, we who are Christians are called to live lives of holiness (covenant-faithfulness) and believing loyalty as we journey through this life on our way to eternity (1 Peter 1:13-21). We seek, as Peter says, to set our hope on eternity, knowing that what we face now is not even worthy to be compared to the good that awaits us. The book of Revelation is, therefore, an exhortation and call to the Church to live faithfully for Jesus, in spite of temptation, persecution, and death, knowing we will receive the Kingdom if we do not give up, but rather overcome “by the blood of the Lamb and the word of [our] testimony.”

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