

# HOW SHALL WE THEN OVERCOME?

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*To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. (Revelation 3:21; NKJV)*

This, and verses like it in the Revelation and elsewhere throughout scripture have always posed a problem for me, as I suspect they have for many Christians. The church has, either explicitly or implicitly, suggested that overcoming requires extraordinary human effort and extreme diligence in conquering areas of sin in our lives that seem to have a stronghold. Alcoholics are encouraged to stay away from bars, attend AA meetings, or even take Antabuse as a deterrent to using alcohol. Those who deal with issues of anger are counseled to engage in all manner of strategies, including “creating space” between yourself and the other person by going into another room, or even reading scripture verses such as “...do not let the sun go down on your wrath” (Ephesians 4:26) or other such verses that admonish us to somehow curtail our anger. The problem with all of these strategies is that, while they may work in any given situation in which we find ourselves, our attraction to alcohol still remains; the anger within our hearts toward a particular person or issue is still there. Every time we encounter a situation that will trigger these fleshly impulses, we must again attempt to push that giant rock uphill, and there will be times that we will inevitably fail. This

failure leads to guilt and condemnation, which only adds fuel to those strongholds in our lives. I know. I have read all of the “how to” books—Christian and secular—and applied all of the best techniques suggested, and was met with utter failure.

Those of us who have surrendered ourselves to the dealings of God in our lives, allowing Him to purge and refine us into His image have certainly all faced discouragement, at times overwhelming us with our inadequacies and shortcomings. We have, at times questioned past decisions that we have made. The church today tells us that when we come to Christ, our path is lighter, our burdens are lifted. Yet, as we are going through this severe process of testing and deepening of our faith, our path does not seem lighter at all. Discouragement, negative thoughts, even the questioning of our walk with God seems ever present. How, then, do we overcome all this that would assail us as we seek to be faithful to His calling in our lives?

Overcoming is something far deeper and more profound and involved than merely conquering a stronghold in one’s life and succeeding in not falling off the wagon (of alcoholism or any other stronghold). It is so much more than merely giving ourselves pep talks when we are discouraged. If we are to be overcomers, we must understand, first, *what it means to overcome*, and second, *how it is that we overcome*. I must begin by emphasizing that I am writing “midstream.” That is to say, I am writing while still in the process of coming to understand how it is that we overcome, and indeed, what it means to overcome. I write as one who is still in process. I have been impressed to share what this process has looked like for me as I have struggled with what it means to overcome.

Let me address, first, my thoughts on *what it means to overcome*. Most of us have the conception that overcoming means either never being tempted with those things that have held us prisoner, or if tempted, resisting those temptations with a more or less perfect 100 percent score. We know, of course, that we are ultimately being formed into the likeness of Christ where this complete victory will be accomplished. In the meantime, we are in process. It might be helpful at

this point to quote Revelation 3:21 from the literal translation provided by the Emphatic Diaglott:

*The **one overcoming**, I will give to him to have sat [with me] in the throne of me, as also **I overcame** and am sat down with the Father of me in the throne of Him.*

Notice the difference in verb tenses here. The “one overcoming” suggests one in process; one who is being made into the image of Christ, to ultimately at the end of this process become like Christ, who *overcame* (past tense). I would suggest, therefore, that what it means to be an overcomer as suggested in the book of Revelation, is to be one whom God has called out to sift and to process, to be made into the very image of His Son. This is significantly different than what most of us have been taught regarding what it means to be an overcomer. And it is liberating. It is not that we are being weighed in the balance, having to achieve some standard of excellence in order to somehow “earn” the status of being an overcomer, as the King James translation seems to suggest. The overcomer, rather, is one who has submitted to the dealings of God. There are bumps along the way, our flesh nature desperately does not want to be dealt with and resists—but the overcomer is Christ in us, the hope of glory. We are the vessel that He is molding and fashioning, and as we are being molded and fashioned—even while we are resisting and expressing our soulish expletives—***we are overcoming!*** Overcoming, then, is simply staying in the fight, remaining in the cauldron of God’s dealings, regardless of our failures.

The question then becomes, NOT *how do we “successfully” overcome all of our strongholds*, BUT RATHER, *how do we enter into the process of overcoming?* These are vastly different questions, which will result in an entirely different response on our part. I came to the realization many years ago that I would never, through the most valiant efforts on my part, be able to overcome the strongholds in my life. I have shared in other writings of a stronghold in my life that held me captive throughout my early adulthood, for over 20 years. I had engaged in every conceivable manner to try to beat it, including getting months upon months of counselling. I would successfully control that beast within me for

days, weeks, and even months. But then it would rear its ugly head again, and down I would fall. This cycle would lead me to an ever increasing depression and despair. I was ready to give up. Late one night after all of my family had gone to bed, I simply told the Lord, “I’m ready to do things your way now.” It was the most frightening prayer that I had ever made because I had no idea what it might mean. I had not been seriously following the Lord up until that point, and while raised in a Christian home, I had never fully surrendered to the Lord. The Lord met me that night, and those chains were broken. I would certainly have to work out this salvation experience in the months and years ahead, but I was no longer a slave to this bondage.

This was my first lesson in what it means to enter in to the process of overcoming, now nearly 30 years ago. My job was simply to make myself available to Him. HE would do the conquering. It would be a lesson, however, that would need to be worked into the deepest part of my being—indeed a lesson that is still unfolding within me. I was on a high of sorts, believing that I had arrived. And indeed I was committed to “doing things His way” now. Nevertheless, I had no idea of the pervasiveness of the beast within that remained to be conquered. It was as I began to take up my cross in obedience to Christ that this beastly flesh nature began to be revealed with increasing clarity. Exposed was a need for control, which would manifest in anger directed at those I loved most dearly. Behind this need for control was a deep-seated fear that ruled more viciously as the years passed. I did not understand this. I had come into the wonderful knowledge that I had been crucified with Christ, that sin had no power over me. Yet, here I was struggling with fear, anger and a need for control over my circumstances. I began to doubt my experience in God, even doubting whether I was truly one of His called out ones.<sup>1</sup> Over some very difficult years of struggle with the raging cauldron within me, the Lord began to reveal that He was behind all of these struggles that I was experiencing for purposes of exposing and dealing with those hidden parts of my old Adamic flesh. This old man was lurking there all along, but I had been able to “manage” it, and therefore was not aware of how deeply

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<sup>1</sup> I had been called “outside the camp” of institutional religion in 2005, and, though I didn’t understand it fully at the time, I knew that God had called me out for His ordained purposes. I was now beginning to doubt whether I had made missteps along the way, disqualifying me from fulfilling the purposes for which I had been called.

rooted he was. Only after years of useless self-effort to control my fear and anger was I able to accept the reality that *I* would never be able to keep this guy in check. Another lesson in the curriculum of truly learning what it means to overcome.

### **Old Adam *Has* Been Put to Death!**

*Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.*

(Romans 6:6).

I came to a critical point in this struggle to overcome when I realized that old Adam had *already* been crucified with Christ. The Greek word used in this passage translated as “with” is *systauroō*, which suggests being crucified “along with” or “in company with.” It is the same word that is used in the gospel accounts of the two thieves being crucified with Christ. I might be so bold as to suggest that those two thieves represent *all of humanity, past, present and future*. The church has been very successful in thundering forth the message that we are “but sinners saved by grace.” The proclamation is, indeed, that we have been saved by grace and that through no works of our own but through faith (Ephesians 2:8). This is indeed a message that we treasure, even as Paul goes on to say in the same verse that this faith is not of ourselves but is itself a gift from God. The proclamation that the churches make, however, goes beyond this glorious declaration. They further claim that we remain sinners, that the Adamic nature is still alive and well, and remains the controlling influence in our lives. The cross of 2000 years ago has been relegated to nothing more than a forgiveness for sin, and indeed for our sinful nature. The church of today fails to appreciate the fact that Jesus’ death and His subsequent resurrection dealt the death blow to the sinful Adamic nature. The implication (and all too often the overt message) is that there is a war raging within us between Satan and God, and the outcome of that war depends upon the decisions and life choices that we make. We do, of course, make decisions, and those decisions do have consequences. I fervently declare, however, that this battle has been won, and with Paul affirm that this body of sin within us has indeed been destroyed,

crucified. Whatever power it now has is but a smokescreen playing upon our minds through the deception with which the prince of this world (Satan) would try to convince us otherwise.

It is very difficult to come against this deception, as we have been indoctrinated with it all of our lives through the various religious traditions that have been so effective in holding us in bondage to this lie of the enemy. It does no good to merely “pretend” that the doubts, fears or vices which plague us are not there, nor does it do any good to try to conquer them through any efforts of our own. We have all been around that bush too many times. What we are called upon to do is to proclaim His truth over these assaults on our physical and soul man. Paul instructs us

*(For the weapons of our warfare [are] not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; (2 Corinthians 10:4-5)*

What are the *imaginings, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God* other than the fears, doubts and bondages that imprison us to a life of total defeat! What does it mean, then, to *bring...into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ* regarding these strongholds? I have so often found myself speaking forth the fears or the hopelessness of the circumstances that I would find myself in. **Such chatter is coming into agreement with the enemy!** I have been so slow in learning that I must speak forth God’s truth over the matter. And the truth is that that old man of sin within us HAS BEEN CRUCIFIED! This act of speaking God’s Truth in opposition to the circumstances we see and the feelings that we feel is contrary to our natural tendencies, as the natural thing to do is to simply voice our feelings. Indeed, it feels hypocritical to speak forth the truth of God’s Word when we don’t feel it in our sensate soul man. It is not hypocritical! His Word is truth; our feelings are the lies. It takes discipline and practice to speak forth the truth of God over a matter. The truth that we speak may come from a portion of scripture that the Lord brings to mind.

The truth that we are to speak may come from a direct Word that the Lord has spoken and incarnated into our spirit in the past. Or, this Word may be spoken to us by another person. However this Word of Truth comes we recognize it by the way it resonates Life—not condemnation or discouragement—within us. Regardless of how we have received God’s truth, it is that truth that we speak into the situations in our lives. We cannot assume, of course, that simply speaking forth His Word on any single occasion will destroy the strongholds in our lives. Nor will we necessarily *feel* the reality of that truth as we speak it on any given occasion. Speaking God’s truth is the *lifestyle of overcoming* that He is bent on forming within us, and that over time will produce great overcoming fruit.

### **We are a New Creature!**

Paul tells us that “...if any man [be] in Christ, [he is] a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2Corinthians 5:17). Our old nature has indeed been dealt the final death blow on Calvary’s cross. More than that, however, we have been given a new nature, that of Christ. He now resides within us, and it is His power within us that will ultimately conquer the sin and death that is still at work within our consciousness. We know this to be a truth at one level, of course, but when the temptations come, when the paralyzing fear grips us, or when circumstances arise that remind us of the hurts and rejection that we have experienced at the hands of another person, we are naturally prone to respond out of the old habits that have worn their groove so deeply that we forget our identity as new creatures in Christ. Nevertheless, through each of these episodes, He is working His nature more deeply into our being. We are often not aware of that new identity, and it does not always manifest clearly in our behavior during these trying times, but it is being established in us during each and every one of these challenges nonetheless. We must know this despite what we feel or think at these moments. And we must also know that He is the one—not us in our self-efforts—*who is now in the process of conquering* these strongholds. We participate with Him in this process, but our very participation is only made possible as He gives us abundantly of His grace to so participate. We have for too long taken upon ourselves the responsibility for overcoming, and have condemned ourselves severely at the point of each failing effort. Let me

assure you, dear friend, that while we might have failed in *our* efforts, He hasn't! Indeed, we have been set up to fail so that He might receive the ultimate glory for the victory that HE is in the process of delivering.

### **There is Therefore Now No Condemnation!**

*There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*  
(Romans 8:1)

There is possibly no greater stumbling block to an overcoming lifestyle than the natural tendency that we have to condemn ourselves when we fail to respond in an "overcoming" manner to life's circumstances. Paul obviously encountered this as well, as the verse above is in response to the struggle that he had with dealing with the sin within his own members, a struggle that occupies much of Chapter Seven of his letter to the Romans. The crux of this dilemma is found in verse 18 of that chapter:

*For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but [how] to perform that which is good I find not.*

So it is that we all find ourselves in that unenviable position of knowing what it is that our new creation man wants to do, but powerless to do it. Many of us have been around the bush dozens of times attempting the good and being met by failure. Inevitably, we beat ourselves up.

Our mistake, of course, is believing that WE (that is our flesh man, old Adam) can conquer those strongholds in our lives in the first place. That will never happen, nor was this ever possible. This was demonstrated through thousands of years of Old Testament history. Israel was never able to keep God's law. This did not surprise God in the least. God's purpose in giving the law to Moses was not to place obligations on His people that He fully expected them to fulfill. He knew they couldn't. His purpose was to reveal the fact that they couldn't! He had a remedy for that in the person of His first born Son, who took upon Himself the sins of the world, past, present and future. We (old Adam) were crucified with



Him that day. And so it is that that man of sin in our members is a trespasser. We have died to that trespasser, and as Paul says, it is no longer *we* who live, but Christ who lives in us. This is the reality as declared by God through the pen of His servant Paul. Nevertheless, the trespasser haunts us, and his greatest weapon is deceiving us into believing that we are that man of sin. He would try to convince us that we really are not a new creation, but are “nothing but a sinner saved by grace.”

And so, after sharing his fierce struggle with that man of sin, Paul triumphantly declares that “there is therefore no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, and walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.” Our failures merely expose the gasping desperation of the enemy of our soul to convince us that we are not truly “in-Christed;” that we are not truly a new creation, with Christ Himself as our new identity, but the same old Adam that we always were. To this assault of condemnation we resound with Paul that we are a *new creature*, that this which is invading our soul man (our mind, emotions and even our bodies) is a trespasser, a liar, a thief and a murderer. We proclaim our identity in Christ. This, too, is a lifestyle that is developed over time. As we so proclaim who *He* declares us to be, the enemy’s power to condemn us is progressively diminished.

### **Our “Failure” is Part of God’s Great Curriculum**

Our natural tendency is to experience our testings and challenges as some sort of “final exam” wherein we are examined over all of the principles that we have learned throughout the course of our “classroom” experience (our walk with God thus far). We determine whether we have overcome by what grade we have received on this final exam. Do we respond with anger as we once did? Just a little less anger? Well, I guess that deserves a C-. Do we submit to the temptation of alcohol and get blasted drunk? Hmm. We failed. An F. Or possibly we had only three drinks and stopped there. Praise God, we passed, though with a mediocre C; or maybe we succumbed and went to the tavern but after entering had to courage to back out and leave. How wonderful we feel. Our great teacher gave us a grade of A-. Better yet, we resisted going to the bar altogether and earned our coveted A+. This approach to overcoming is illustrated by a story that

I once heard at a Promise Keeper's rally that was presented as a picture of how we are to overcome: *A man was walking down the street and fell into an open man hole. He yelled and yelled for someone to pull him out and waited for hours until someone came. The next day the man was walking down the same street and fell into the same man hole. This time he discovered that there were protrusions on the side of the hole and managed to get himself out. The next day he was walking down the same street and almost fell into the man hole, but saw it just in time and jumped over it. The next day he was walking down the same street and saw the man hole well in advance and walked a wide berth around it without ever being in danger of falling in. The next day he took a different street.*

This is the understanding of overcoming that most of us have been taught. Sadly, it doesn't help us much when we don't see the open man hole in the other street that we take and fall head long into it! The problem with this approach is that one day we may pass with flying colors and the next day we fail miserably. New circumstances arise for which we are not prepared, and we respond by default as we have so many times in the past. In short, the new street that we took as the answer to our failures also had a manhole and because it looked a little different, we weren't prepared for it and we fell right in!

The truth of the matter is that this is not the correct paradigm for understanding this dilemma that we are facing in our lives. This is *not* the nature of God's curriculum. To use the same analogy of a classroom curriculum, the testings that we face are much more akin to a preliminary exam (not a final exam), the purpose of which is to simply reveal those areas of the curriculum that our teacher or professor uses to focus his or her lessons to insure that we will be prepared to eventually take the final exam. We don't expect to ace such a preliminary exam, and there is no shame or condemnation when we fail miserably. We knew we would fail and that is why we signed up for the course in the first place! The Great Teacher then designs a curriculum focused on those areas of weakness so as to perfect us and prepare us for that great "final exam." And, praise God, our successful passing of the final exam has already been predetermined by our Great Professor!

We must understand that God is not surprised by our failures. We have, in a very real sense, been set up to fail. In my experience, there are at least two purposes that God is setting out to accomplish in our failures. First, He is demonstrating to us that WE cannot overcome; that is, the overcoming of strongholds in our lives will never be accomplished in our own strength. Without failure, we quickly come (even unconsciously) to attribute our success to the strategies and techniques that we have learned, and lean on our own knowledge and strength to continue on in victory. God will have none of this. He has us on a path of complete dependence upon Him. If He reveals to us a strategy to overcome, He is determined that our faith and our confidence will not be in the strategy, but rather in Him, the source of that strategy. At whatever point we become dependent on the strategy rather than on Him and Him alone, He will make arrangements for a failure. His *primary* purpose in all of our struggles is not that we will always be successful in overcoming, but rather that we become made in His image, which means total dependence upon Him, complete surrender to Him and His purposes, and a recognition that it is Him in us who has conquered all sin.

A second purpose for our failures is related to the first. Our failures are built into the very curriculum that God has for us as overcomers. There is much that is wrought within us through our failures. Our very sense of failure and the condemnation that we so often feel during these times are the very things that drive us back to God in humility, dependence and surrender. This posture is reinforced and deepened with every failure. I remember coming to a place where I felt nothing but disdain for myself—that is, old Adam who seemed to be continually haunting me—after struggling with several bouts of anger and fear. You see, I had been operating under the illusion that I had total control over this man of sin. That was my problem. I thought that *I* had control. Indeed, as long as I was in control over my circumstances, I did not have a problem with fear or anger. When circumstances arose that were out of my control, or when my desires or felt needs clashed with my wife or someone who was insisting on something other than my felt needs, I began to feel out of control. Fear ensued, followed by anger, often at those I loved most. This is all by God's design as He is

bringing me to a place of trust in Him, a place of Sabbath rest wherein I lean not on my own understanding or abilities, but rather on His loving care and provision.

### **Entering in to His Sabbath Rest**

I once heard a speaker make what seemed like a very strange statement, but one that resonated deep within me. He said that the most effective weapon in spiritual warfare is entering in to God's Sabbath rest. I would also suggest that the most effective weapon in overcoming is entering into the Sabbath rest of God. This is, of course not something that we can simply "will" to do. Yet, the writer of Hebrews counsels us to "labor" to enter in to His Sabbath rest. The Greek word for labor here is *spoudazo*, which suggests being very intentional about something. The same word is used by Paul when he tells young Timothy to "study" to show himself approved unto God... Elsewhere the word is translated as "diligence." Hence, while entering the Sabbath rest of the Lord is indeed a supernatural gifting of God's grace, we are participants in the process of entering that rest.

So how is it that we enter this Sabbath rest? I would suggest that this rest comes as we apply the principles that have been discussed here. This rest comes, first, as we recognize that the axe has been laid to the root of the strongholds that have been binding us. This was accomplished at the cross. The power that these strongholds have is an illusory power that has convinced us that we ARE that sinful expression that these strongholds suggest. To state it more directly, we have become convinced that we ARE an alcoholic or an addict of whatever stripe; that we ARE a control freak; that we ARE a wife or child abuser; that we ARE nothing but a sinner; that we ARE, in short, whatever expression that the strongholds in our life take. The truth is, this is our old nature that has been put to death (Romans 6:6). We who are in Christ are now a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17)! It is true, of course, that the character of this new creature that we are must be worked out in us. It does not magically come upon the surrender of our lives to the Lordship of Christ. Indeed, it is this surrender that gives the Lord permission to raise these old dead bones to the surface so that He can purge them from us. It is indeed this very struggle, and I dare to say, the very

failures that we experience, that is the working out of the new creature that we are. What is critical to understand, however, is that it is now Christ in us who is doing this work. Our stumbles along the way are no cause for condemnation; He knew that we would stumble all along.

Our feelings will condemn us when we stumble. Our feelings are part of that soul man whose redemption is still being worked out. They are, therefore, still vulnerable to the incredibly persuasive power of the adversary. This adversary is the thief that Jesus said is come to steal, to kill, and to destroy. But Jesus said that *"I am come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly"* (John 10:10). And so it is that at these times of so-called failure we learn NOT to give voice to our feelings, but to speak His powerful truth into every situation in which we find ourselves. As we develop this discipline, we discover His Sabbath rest.

What an adventure it is that we are finding ourselves on. I confess without hesitation that I am still in the middle of the learning curve. The failures are still very much a part of my experience. I am learning, however, that speaking forth His truth, and that declaring myself to be who He says that I now am is the armor that He has provided to withstand the darts of the enemy. Yes, as we engage the struggle in this way we are indeed *"the one(s) overcoming"* (Revelation 3:21)! This is no new deep spiritual revelation. It has been declared throughout the centuries by men and women in whom it has become incarnate. Indeed, many who are reading this short article have entered far more deeply into this Sabbath rest than have I. I pray, however, that these elementary principles will provide encouragement and strength to anyone struggling with strongholds in their life that seem impossible to overcome. He has already won the victory in your life, and despite the appearances, He is now in the process of working it out in your experience!