

Triumphant Overcoming

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The presence of Peter, James and John at the transfiguration (Mt. 17:1) provides a convenient representation of the kinds of followers of Christ who have been, are and will be the true citizens of the kingdom of God. This characterization can be seen to dovetail into Jesus' teaching that "the kingdom of God is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened." (Mt. 13:33) The three types of followers –

- the "churched" who are somehow in but not of the "church" (like Peter who wanted to build buildings for Moses, Elijah and Jesus rather than simply listen to and obey Jesus – Mt. 17:4-5);
- the martyrs who give their life in the course of their service to the Messiah-King (like James who was beheaded by Herod – Acts 12:1-2); and
- the spiritual followers who live their lives in faithful service to the King in spite of all circumstances (like John who faithfully served Christ in Ephesus and the on the prison island of Patmos and gave to all who follow Christ what is perhaps the deepest picture of Christ presented in the New Testament)

by the time of the end of the age are all leavened in various degrees with the leaven of malice, deceit and hypocrisy that attends the mother of the apostate "church," labeled Mystery Babylon (Rev. 17:5 – though the "church" is only one of "her" works). But even if some who are reading this may have difficulties with this interpretation of these passages (and there are certainly other ways to view these verses), if we have any ability to spiritually discern the things around us, we find that the genuine believers we do know will fit into one of these categories – a "Peter," a "James," or a "John" – just as surely as we find there are those who have refused to resist the challenges their category presents and at least appear to have become only another part of the apostasy, the great falling away from the faith that occurs before the return of Christ. (Mt. 24:10, 2 Ths. 2:3) Each of these types of follower – whether one is a "Peter," a "James" or a "John" – must overcome the deceptions inherent in that type. Perhaps one of the most common mistakes, especially of those followers of Christ still influenced by the "church," is to fail to recognize what category one is in and then oversimplify the complexities involved and/or over-complicate the simplicity of it all!

If there is one word that has fallen from common usage in "Christian" circles, it would be the need to overcome. Some even preach that any actions or "works" are merely "self-effort" to be saved or just a return to works of the law so as to be justified before God. But even where this deception is recognized for what it is, the idea that we need to overcome something as an integral part of our salvation experience is not a popular idea. Yet it remains true nonetheless. In the three categories above, the "churched" (the "Peters") must overcome many deceptions, including the traditions of men (Mk. 7:9), the doctrines of demons (1 Tim. 4:1), lawlessness (doing what is right in one's own eyes – Jdgs. 21:25 – a mystery, a "secret," that requires divine revelation to be rightly understood, something that Paul said was already at work in his day – 2 Ths. 2:7), Nicolaitanism (having lords over the people, most often entitled "pastors" or called "committees" - Rev. 2:6, 15), Babylonianisms (the "church" has departed from the New

Testament pattern and “coincidentally” devolved into the same pattern as the synagogue invented in Babylon) and other deceptions too numerous to list. The martyrs (the “James”), as has been true in every century, have always had to overcome the devil by “the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and [that] they did not love their lives to the death.” (Rev. 12:11) The spiritual followers of Christ (the “Johns”), in or out of the “church,” must contend with carnal “brothers” who cannot comprehend the spiritual things of God (1 Cor. 2:14) as well as overcome the very human tendencies toward spiritual pride (Gal. 6:1, etc.) and lawlessness (see above). In the end of the age, all nations (or peoples) will hate the real followers of Christ (Mt. 24:9) and anyone who will remain loyal to Christ will be required to face the enmity and hatred of men who will be spurred on by demons who hate us even more – simply because we carry the Spirit of Christ within our being.

These categories can be seen also in the characteristics given in Christ’s seven letters to the seven ekklesias. Each ekklesia is representative of the type of follower of Christ and, as such, the promise given to that ekklesia is also given to the follower of Christ in similar circumstances. (The ekklesias also represent historical developments of the followers of Christ throughout the so-called “church age” but that aspect does not contradict the applications we are making now but rather demonstrates the multi-faceted wisdom of God in a unique and remarkable way.

- To the followers in Ephesus who had left their first love (Rev. 2:4, comparable to Peter’s desire to build tabernacles rather than simply listen to Christ – Mt. 17:4-5), Jesus said, “To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of paradise.” (Rev. 2:7)

- To the followers in Smyrna, the persecuted followers (the “James”), Jesus simply said, “Be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life... He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” (Rev. 2:10-11)

- To the followers in Pergamos who had come under the influence of both Balaam and the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:14-15 – “Peters”), Jesus said, “To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.” (Rev. 2:17)

- To the followers in Thyatira who had come under the influence of Jezebel (Rev. 2:20– “Peters”), Jesus said, “And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations...as I also have received from My Father; and I will give him the morning star.” (Rev. 2:26-28)

- To the followers in Sardis whose works were not perfect (or complete) before God (Rev. 3:2– “Peters”), Jesus said, “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life, but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.” (Rev. 3:5)

- To the followers in Philadelphia who have persevered in following Him (“Johns”), Jesus simply told them, “Hold fast what you have, that no one may

take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.” (Rev. 3:11-12)

- To the followers in Laodicea who were “lukewarm” and thought themselves rich and in need of nothing but were in reality “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:16-17– “Peters.” These qualities are shared with those in the apostasy, a comparison that supports the view that the Laodiceans represent the dominant tendency of the ekklesia at the time of Christ’s return), Jesus said, “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcome and sat down with My Father on His throne.” (Rev. 3:21)

To every type, category and “flavor” of ekklesia, the followers who claim Christ, the need to overcome something is present. No one gets a “free ride” with the free gift God gives them – that is, no responsibilities, no requirements to obey, no actions to perform or works to accomplish and fulfill. (see also Eph. 2:10) Though detailing what each of these exhortations and promises mean is beyond what we are examining, it is enlightening to note that each of these promises are merely restatements of what we receive when we gain what men like to call simply “salvation.” Simply put, overcoming *is* a requirement that is an integral part of being saved!

“Church” or Kingdom Expectations

As those of us who have been diverted from the kingdom of God by our “church” affiliations and practices seek to come into the kingdom of God, we find it is a very “different kind of ball game.” The “church” draws in passive listeners who are expected to avoid gross wickedness (mostly to avoid giving the “pastor” and the “church” bad press) while they support (emotionally and financially) the “pastor,” professional staff and pay for the building that everyone meets in. The ekklesia unites with those whom the King draws into their circle and all are expected to aid one another in the process of purifying ourselves “from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” (2 Cor. 7:1) The “church” allows its members to attend lectures (“sermons” and “teachings”) and to do as much or as little purportedly *for* God (who must be impotent and helpless) as they want to do (what the New Testament calls lawlessness). The ekklesia expects everyone to think for themselves (1 Cor. 1:10) and exercise their own gifting from God (1 Pet. 4:10-11), enabling *everyone* to speak what God has put on their hearts. (1 Cor. 14:26) The “church’s” “gospel” is “Come hear our guy speak or come see what we do and, if you like what you see, come back and participate as much or as little as you like.” The gospel of the kingdom is “Repent! The kingdom is here.” And then it is the duty and responsibility of any true citizen of His kingdom to truly present Christ as he or she goes and makes disciples from all peoples, teaching them to observe (obey) all that Christ has commanded. (Mt. 28:19-20)

To overcome does not mean that we must become some superstar “pastor” or televised “talking head.” To overcome means that we remain faithful to what *Christ* requires of us. To overcome does not mean that we passively attend “church” “services” (in or out of the “church” building) and learn more Bible facts that will only add to our judgment because we never *did* any of what we have learned. To overcome means to rely on His grace (power) to enable us to present the Person of Christ to the fallen, dying, decaying world around us. Being a “church”-ite

or the follower of our own preferred spiritual guru will not be enough to enable us to persevere to the end. (Mt. 24:13) Only the righteous sons of the kingdom will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. (Mt. 13:38, 43)

“The gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations [before] the end will come.” (Mt. 24:14) This true and original gospel will be opposed by the nations, by other religions and especially by the “church,” the apostasy. The kingdom will be built in twos and threes (Mt. 18:20) as it always has been and there may or may not be any mass movement that people can point to and say “That is the kingdom of God.” (see Lk. 17:22-23) It is in the face of all this that we are called to overcome, persevere and endure.

The message of the “church” is ease, comfort, passivity – but it is deceit and death. The way of the kingdom involves a cross and self-denial (Lk. 9:23) – but it is the way that leads to eternal life. The paradox of the kingdom is that it is “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17) even as we suffer according to the will of God. (1 Pet. 2:20-21) “Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.” (1 Pet. 4:1-2)

Paul wrote, “You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please Him who enlisted him as a soldier.” (2 Tim. 2:3-4) We have been born into a war – the war between God and Satan. And though this war is very one-sided where God and Christ are concerned (as is true for all who abide and remain in Christ no matter how beleaguered we may feel!), those who are negligent, lazy, lawless or disobedient regarding their salvation and the will of God are practicing enmity against God (Rom. 8:7) and will suffer the consequences of their deeds. It is not all that difficult to become a casualty in this war just as it is not overly difficult to be a loyal soldier who overcomes and triumphs over his foes – the flesh, the devil and the enticements of this wicked world.

Kingdom Realities

This is precisely where being a citizen-soldier in Christ’s kingdom differs from other religions. The Muslims, for example, require you to “repent” and be converted to the Islamic religion or they will cut your head off – literally. Those Muslims who kill others to “defend” their religion are accounted as heroes by their god Allah. The citizen-soldier of Christ’s kingdom does not “wrestle against flesh and blood (human beings), but against (spiritual beings called) principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this age and spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly (spiritual) places.” (Eph. 6:12) Though the Muslims work toward the overthrow and destruction of any non-Islamic government and some rogue, misguided, fringe “Christian” cults might advocate for rebellion and revolution, the true citizen-soldier of Christ’s kingdom is instructed to “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s” (Lk. 20:25) and to “be subject to the (civil) governing authorities.” (Rom. 13:1) He is expected to bear “the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.” (Gal. 5:22-23) Even though his is a war only in the *spiritual* realms, he is likely to receive the same treatment Christ received from the governments of this world. It remains a truth that “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22)

The kingdom of God among men is that realm where Christ is actually followed and obeyed. This is the essence of a king over a kingdom. For too long Christ has been the

figurehead over the petty fiefdoms and turfs of mere men. As the kingdom of God is preached, these must fall away and die or the proprietors of these things must take their place among the enemies of God. Either Christ is one's King or one's enemy – this too is the nature of a king and his kingdom. Our modern experiments in democracy, republics, socialism and the like may have caused us to forget what it means to have a king and be a citizen in that kingdom but that does not mean that Christ shares in our amnesia. He is still the King whose dominion is without end. (Dan. 7:14, etc.) That He has allowed men to practice treason, betrayal and all manner of evils in His name for some reason of His own does not mean His kingdom has ceased to exist. It only means that those who have disobeyed Him and those who have remained obediently loyal will be rewarded as their actions deserve. The tares, those who are in reality the sons of the devil who cause others to stumble and fall away and who practice lawlessness (what is right in their own eyes), will one day soon be removed and cast into a fire. (Mt. 13:41-42 – interpret that as you will, it does *not* signify a pleasant experience!) The wheat, the sons of the kingdom (v. 38) will continue to shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. (v. 43)

The Master's Return

Jesus' warning is all the more appropriate and pertinent to our day. He said,

“Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has. But if that servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins to beat the menservants and maidservants, and to eat and drink and be drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few.” (Lk. 12:42-48)

Contained in this parable is nearly every element that plagues the follower of Christ today. Let us consider these elements carefully.

- “Give them their portion of food in due season.” (v. 42) The “church” would have us believe this is what the man in the pulpit is doing with his regularly scheduled “sermons.” This is “feeding the flock” in their eyes. Picturing one man trying to dispense a handful of grass to a bunch of sheep quickly shows us the fallacy of this idea. Can you say “Pastor Stubs”? Further, “in due season” does not refer to Sundays and Wednesdays at the “church” building. “In due season” means giving milk to babes and meat to adults. (1 Cor. 3:2) “In due season” means exhorting at the proper time, comforting at the proper time, on some having compassion but on others snatching them as from fire “hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.” (Jude 22-23) “In due season” is a function of the timing and leading of the Lord by His Spirit, not slavish obedience to the calendar and clock.

- The servant who is diligently attending to his Master’s business will be *blessed*. (v. 43) Interpret that how you will – it *will be* a pleasant experience, to say the least!

- The servant who begins to beat the servants (v. 45 – whether because they challenge his doctrines and practices or refuse to attend his “church” or to recognize his “delegated,” Nicolaitan authority or whatever other reason he concocts to preserve his deceptions and preferred unrighteousness – see 2 Ths. 2:12) will be cut in two (figurative of the dual streams of power that have characterized his life, of the double-minded state, both carnal and spiritual, that dominated his existence) and he will be assigned his place among the unbelievers. (v. 46) This man who was once saved enough to serve the Master turned back to his own filth and took up his own way of doing things and is ultimately returned to a fate among those who perish – in spite of what his doctrines say! (see 2 Pet. 2:20-22)

- The knowingly disobedient servant will be beaten with many stripes (v. 47) but the ignorantly disobedient servant will be beaten with few stripes. (v. 48) Either way disobedience will be justly punished – interpret that how you will but this too will *not* be a pleasant experience. Much better to be the obedient servant who will be blessed upon his Master’s return.

Jesus’ warning sign of His return and of the end of the age, “Take heed that no one deceive you” (Mt. 24:4) and Paul’s instruction, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21) may well be the two most needed exhortations we need to hear in this season. The “Peters” must overcome the deceptions of the “church” (the worldly institution and pattern) and remain faithful to Christ. The “James” must overcome the devil (Rev. 12:11) and remain faithful to Christ. The “Johns” must overcome their flesh (Gal. 5:17) and remain faithful to Christ. Each must overcome whatever inhibits or prevents them from being conformed to the likeness of Christ. This *is* the high and upward call of God in Christ Jesus notwithstanding the devil’s unrelenting efforts to obscure this with all manner of deceptions, counterfeits and replacements.

Let he who has ears hear.

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