

Letters To Seven Churches (Part Eight): Overcoming

Striving and Enduring to Transform Into Christ's Image

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Given 26-Apr-19; Sermon #1484AM

I began my sermon on the first day of Unleavened Bread speaking about how almost everyone thinks of the book of Revelation as a book of prophecy, of symbols, of all these various things that we see in there—all the dragons and beasts and eagles and whatnot that is in there, and it is very picturesque. That is all people seem to get out of it.

But we saw that very few people think of it or consider it as a book of theology. But it is, and I mentioned in that last sermon that the theology of the book of Revelation is simple. It is practical. It is theology on the ground, if you will, what people need to know to survive the Day of the Lord, what people need to know in the end time to make sure that they are focused on Christ and moving forward with faith so that they could survive and endure to the end. That is the kind of theology that comes out of the book of Revelation.

We did see last time that the Greek verb form of *repent* is used there more than any other book in the New Testament. Twelve times it is used in Revelation, and the next most usages of that term *repent* are in the book of Luke, nine times. I do not want to go over all that information too much. I want to move forward.

There is another word, though. Another theological word that is also used twelve times in Revelation. It is very interesting because both of these terms are used twelve times, and they are also used essentially in the same manner, if you will. There is a whole bunch of them in the letters to the seven churches, and then there are just a couple of times later on, and in this case we will get to at least one of those later on ones. But it is almost like God intended them to go in tandem because they are linked. This other term that I am talking about is *overcome*. Remember every letter to those seven churches has at least one instance of "he who overcomes."

So that is the word we are going to look into today. Like I said, it is used twelve times in the book of Revelation and eight times in the letters to the seven churches, pretty much exactly like the word *repentance*. The word that I have in mind—overcoming—is the *result* of the process of repentance. That is how we normally look at overcoming. That if we finally overcome, that is the end of the process of repentance, and then we get a reward. That is how it seems to come out in those letters to the seven churches. But I want to delve into the word *overcome* because it is a lot more than that.

The word is the Greek verb *nikao*. And it means to conquer, to overcome, to prevail, to be victorious. Simple enough, right? We all know Nike. We wear them on our feet. Some people have Nike clothing of various sorts and, of course, they are a sports apparel company and so they splash across all their clothing that swoosh, and it is a symbol of victory, of winning. They got their name from the Greek goddess. Actually, she had wings, which is where the swoosh comes in. But it is the winged Greek goddess of victory. That is the noun form of *nikao*, Nike.

The idea in Greek we could already see is winning, conquering, being the victor. One Greek-English lexicon gave the sense of *nikao*, not a definition, but this is the sense of *nikao*, as "to win in the face of obstacles." So we are not talking about any kind of easy victory here. We are not talking about something that you just go through, and it is no problem. There is always going to be problems if you have the victory and overcome in the sense of what *nikao* means. That is a very basic way to understand it. Winning in the face of obstacles.

Nikao is used intransitively (these are for the grammarians out there, which I am probably one of two or three), as "to win." He won, she won, they won. In grammar an *intransitive* verb is one that does not require a direct object. Now a *transitive* verb is one that *does* require a direct object. So it is used in the Greek to mean "to defeat." The Greeks defeated the Persians. There you have subject, a transitive verb, and an object, the Persians. It could be used this way throughout the Bible. So it could be said that you won and just leave it at that. Or it could be used transitively to say that you defeated somebody else, or some other thing.

The word's intrinsic sense, though, because of this, deals with genuine superiority and overwhelming success. When you have a victory that could be called Nike, then that means that you fought through all the obstacles that were before you and you emerged the victor, showing yourself superior to those others who were in the fight, and that you had overwhelming success against them or it or whatever it happens to be. So one who conquers, or one who overcomes, is in terms of the Greek sense of the term, plainly superior, having demonstrated remarkable accomplishment in his endeavor.

This sense is there in the Bible, definitely, because God commends, Jesus Christ commends those who overcome. "Hey, you've accomplished something great! You've shown yourself to be superior to, not only millions of people who would never have even tried to do what you did, but also you've shown yourself to superior to demons. You've shown yourself superior to all the obstacles that you had to overcome." So when you come out the other end of overcoming, you have proven something—that you are a cut above, which is actually the definition of the word *holy*. So that is the Greek term.

But we must remember that the writers of the New Testament were primarily Jews, not Greeks. Their first language was Hebrew or Aramaic, and what they did most likely, and this is what a lot of people who learn a second language do, is they think their thoughts in their first language (in this case, Hebrew), and they find Greek terms to stick in there so that they could speak it in Greek. I know I do this in French. Whenever I have had to go over to see the Boyers and wherever we have gone in French speaking areas, I think the words in English, and then I translate it into English/French and I say it and they say, "Oh, I understand because you messed up the syntax and it's not really the right word, but yeah, I get the gist of what you're trying to say."

We have to remember that these apostles who wrote the New Testament were Jews, and the only Gentile I know who probably had Greek as his first language was Luke. So all of these men were thinking Hebrew thoughts. They were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, and then they were translated into Greek later. And so you have a lot of this putting Greek terms onto Hebrew thought forms and they do not quite fit exactly. You have to go back into the Old Testament and the words that were used there to try to

figure out what these Jewish men were trying to say in Greek. They wrote their Hebrew thoughts in the Greek language, and they found as close as possible equivalents in the other tongue. And I think this had an influence on the word *nikao* because it is a Greek word standing for a Hebrew thought, but the Hebrew thought is not exactly like the Greek definition of the word *nikao*.

The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament makes an interesting comment to this end in discussing this word, *nikao*. Now this is a lot of Greek, well actually more Hebrew than Greek. But if you can stay with me, it is very important. Quoting here:

In the LXX [which you know to be the Greek version of the Old Testament], *nikao* [and its forms] are not used for [Hebrew] *gabar* ["to be superior"] or *salah* ["to succeed"], but for *zakah* (to stand innocent before the judgment, ["to have purity of soul"]), *hamad* ("to strive"), and especially *nasah* [depending on the context: "to be preeminent," "to lead, direct, or supervise," or "to be enduring or lasting."]

This is to me this is very interesting, because what they said, if I can translate the intellectual speech there, is that the Greek definition of Nike or *nikao* does not fit the Hebrew thought of what overcoming is. It is close, but it is not exactly right. So we have to understand the words that the Hebrews used for this, and it has to do with these three things: To have purity of soul, to strive, (and I will just choose this last one here), to be enduring or lasting. Because all of those—to be preeminent, to lead, direct, or supervise, or to be enduring or lasting—have to do with coming out at the end as being the one who has succeeded or is superior.

So this comment from *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* implies that we should put the stress on the Hebrew background of the writer, John, or even if you will, the ultimate Author, Jesus Christ, then, on the strict Greek definition of the term. In this case, John or Jesus, if you will, wants us to understand that overcoming has more to do with becoming pure and striving and enduring than being superior and succeeding overwhelmingly.

Remember, the Hebrews are all about very concrete things. They are all about the work that is involved in things and the effort that goes into things—not like the Greeks who have these high minded thoughts. So it is not showing oneself to be superior. It is not having overwhelming success. Those are Greek ideas because they were very much interested in those type of things. The Hebrew idea, though, that comes out of this is that you struggle and you strive and you endure all the pains and privations that come across you within that walk that you are taking toward the Kingdom of God, and in the end you come out with purity of heart.

So the biblical concept of overcoming deals with sustained and unrelenting effort to purify one's character. That is about as simple as I could put it. The biblical concept deals with the sustained, unrelenting effort to purify one's character, and that comes from the Old Testament, not necessarily the New, although the concept is in the New Testament, just put in different ways.

Today is the last day of Unleavened Bread. We should not forget that. A feast whose symbols bring out the idea that God desires His people to remove sin from their lives and character, and replace it with godliness and righteousness. So in the remaining time that we have, we will consider the Bible's concept of overcoming with, like last time, a special emphasis on how it is used in the letters to the seven churches. Please turn back to the chapter with all of God's feasts in it, Leviticus 23, and we will read verses 4-8, which have to do with this particular feast we are observing today. And there God says:

Leviticus 23:4-8 "These are the feasts of the Lord, holy convocations which you shall proclaim at their appointed times. On the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight is the Lord's Passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the Lord [notice what is said here]; seven days you must eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no customary work on it. But you shall offer an offering made by fire to the Lord for seven days. The seventh day shall be a holy convocation; you shall do no customary work on it."

Here we have our marching orders for this particular feast day and the whole feast besides. It struck me when I was reading this the other day, that here in the chapter where all of God's feasts are listed, commanded, and explained that the instructions on the Feast of Unleavened Bread are concise and very pointed. If we would go back into Exodus 12 and 13, there are long passages that talk about the Feast of Unleavened Bread and how we are supposed to keep it. But here where we have a lot on the firstfruits, Pentecost, Trumpets, Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles, there is very little said about the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Maybe it is because there was so much back there in Exodus that they had that information already. But here it just struck me that for such an important feast, there was very little said. But it is punchy, if you will. It is right there. What is important for us at this moment is said in just a few words.

Notice what is said here. Notice what is emphasized in these few verses. Actually, it is just verses 6, 7, and 8, just three verses. But what is emphasized are four things, actually four *actions* that were to take.

The first is we are to eat unleavened bread seven days. That is the first action. That is the first command. Eat the unleavened bread for seven days. Ingest, take in unleavened bread seven days—all seven days.

The second thing is that the first day of Unleavened Bread is a holy convocation and you are to go to the holy convocation and then the last day of Unleavened Bread you are also to go to a holy convocation. So we are to worship God on the first and the last day, specifically, for a reason, on the holy day.

Three, it is mentioned at least twice that you shall do no customary work on these first and last days of Unleavened Bread. We are to avoid doing our jobs, our normal jobs, the stuff we do on other days, the weekdays.

Four, we are to offer burnt offerings to the Lord *all seven days*. If you want to check that out, go to Numbers 28:17-25 where the offerings are mentioned, the holy day offerings are mentioned there and specified what is to be given. But what is emphasized for the Feast of Unleavened Bread are the burnt offerings that are made each of the seven days. Very important.

What do you think these four things suggest? Eating unleavened bread, going to the holy convocation, doing no customary work—which means that there is other work to do so you want to stop doing your customary work and do something, special work—and offer burnt offerings to the Lord all seven days.

What does this suggest? We know what these things symbolize, what they represent. Eating unleavened bread symbolizes ingesting Christ or ingesting God's truth or God's way, ingesting righteousness into us. Not the way of the world, that is leavened, that is corruption, not the way of Satan, not even the way of ourselves. But God wants us to ingest His way—Him.

We know that holy convocations are the time that we worship God. We learn about Him and His way through the messages that were given, through the teaching that is given at the holy convocation. We come before Him. We worship. That is, we give Him honor and glory and praise. And then we listen to Him so that there is a two-way communication there on these holy days.

Doing no customary work points to focusing our focus on doing God's work and will, not our own. We can slip in Isaiah 58 here where it says when you come before Him and you keep the Sabbath, you are not to do your own pleasures but to do His, to do the things He wants you to do.

And the finally, offering burnt offerings represents giving our lives in dedicated service to God.

If we put all these things together, let me just go through them quickly again, ingesting Christ and His way, His truth, worshipping God and learning from Him, focusing on God's work and God's will, and sacrificing yourself in service to God and to, obviously, fellow man (but that is not really what is in the burnt offering. The burnt offering is more about giving oneself to God). So what does that mean? What does that sound like? To me it simply sounds like the process of growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, because we go from knowledge, to a relationship, to working, and giving ourselves wholeheartedly.

Those are those four things that I just mentioned that are emphasized here in Leviticus 23:6-8. In a word, this is the process of *overcoming*, especially if we define it as we saw earlier from the Hebrew point of view as striving and enduring and purifying one's character. This is how you do it. These are simple steps but they are major steps. And if you do them, you are going to progress very quickly in overcoming the things that we are supposed to overcome.

So if we ingest God's truth, if we worship God and learn from Him, if we focus on doing God's will and doing God's work, and giving yourself in sacrifice, we are going to overcome and grow like crazy. Four simple steps. I could say that is all it takes, but these are very *difficult* steps for most of us because of what we got between our ears, our own will, our own nature. But God puts us through these paces every year to learn these sorts of things so that we can make the rest of the year better by doing what He wants us to do. And this is how He shows us how it happens.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread, if we look at it from this angle, teaches and reminds us of our responsibilities during our *lifelong* task to transform into the image of Christ. We do that by overcoming the ungodly aspects of our human nature, by overcoming the influence of this world, and by overcoming our adversary, Satan the Devil. God wants to see us dedicated and persistent as we fight the Christian fight to completion. He wants to see our nose to the grindstone. He wants to see us not giving up at any point, not relaxing, but keep moving forward because the prize is so great, because what we get out of it is so wonderful. Of course, He gets a son or a daughter that thinks just like Him. And He is looking forward to that, a whole bunch of people that He could really have a relationship of "equals." I put that in quotes because He is always going to be greater than us. But He wants people that are like Him to engage, to know, to love throughout all eternity.

I mentioned having a kind of an attitude—that God wants this kind of an attitude from us. Let us see an example of this back in Genesis 32. This is in the lifetime of Jacob. I am sure you will recognize what I am getting at here very quickly.

Genesis 32:22-30 And [Jacob] arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed

over the ford of Jabbok. He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had. Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. Now when He saw [that is, this Man] that He did not prevail against him [Jacob], He [the Man] touched the socket of his [Jacob's] hip, and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks." But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me." So He [the Man] said to him, "What is your name?" [Of course He knew what his name was.] He said, "Jacob." And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed [or overcome]. Then Jacob asked, saying, "Tell me Your name, I pray." And He said, "Why is it that you ask about My name?" And He blessed him there. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." [So he knew who he was wrestling.]

I do not know why we need to do all this He, He, He stuff. We knew exactly that He was God.

Jacob's name was changed to Israel due to this quality that he possessed. He showed it in this wrestling match with God. All night he struggled. He wrestled with God all night long and would not let go until he received a blessing from God. Jacob was a character. Jacob was unusual. He had a tenacity. He had a fighting spirit, if you will. He had a desire to win, a desire to win in the Hebrew sense.

Now I do not know if he thought of it in terms of purity of character, but he certainly thought of it in terms of struggling and enduring. And he wanted the reward at the end for struggling and enduring. This is the attitude God wants to see in us. Why do you think He changed his name? Because Jacob showed Him a part of Jacob's character that He really liked. That he struggled with God, he would wrestle with God and he would not let Him go even through the pain of his hip separation. He did not care about the obstacles. He did not care about the pain. He was going to hang on until the very end and receive the blessing.

Remember I said, God wants to see this in us. Paul, in Galatians 6:16 calls us, the church, the elect, the Israel of God. These are the ones, these elect are the ones who have that same tenacious spirit as our ancestor, Jacob—that will hold fast! Do you like that term? How many times is that used in the letters to the seven churches? "Hold fast to what you have," and that is what Jacob did! He clung to Christ. And he would not let Him go no matter what happened, even though God Himself injured the man causing great pain. And it is an injury that lasted the rest of his life. He walked with a limp for the rest of his life, but he would not let Christ go. Jacob prevailed. He overcame with God and with men. He was dogged, unrelenting, unwilling to let go of what is good, what is God? Even under that agony that he was experiencing, he did not falter, but strove all the harder to endure to receive a blessing from God.

Now, this episode that we just read marks the turning point in Jacob's life and in his character. He is a changed man after this. This is what his name did. He changed his name and it marked a change in character. He went from heel catcher or supplanter, which is what Jacob means, indicating nefarious, underhanded dealings. If you go and read the chapters before this, he was always trying to trick Laban out of something. And his own brother Esau, his own father. He was a tricky man. But then God changed his name to prevailer, or overcomer with God.

Do you know what Israel actually means if you break it down into its etymological roots? Technically it means "God fights." But the way it has come to be understood was "fights God" or "struggles with God," "strives with God." It is not that he is fighting *against* Him. He is fighting *with* him because he wants what God is willing to give him. So he fights God. You have to get your mind into a kind of Hebrew way of thinking. But that is what it comes out as. It is folk etymology because it really should mean "God fights." But the way the Hebrews thought of it after this occurred was that you fight *with* God, meaning on His side, for Him, not against Him.

But anyway, it is also interesting that when God gives His little spiel about the name Israel, He says, "You prevailed with God and with men." He added, "and with men" in there. Now he did fight with a Man, but this was Jacob's character. Jacob fought with everybody. Jacob tried to prevail with

everybody. That was just the kind of man he was. But it shows that Jacob had the same tenacity in overcoming and combating the ideas and plots and temptations of other people, as he did trying to be a warrior of God and overcome the spiritual things. So he was trying to overcome *everything*.

That is what Jacob was. He was our example in the way of the overcomer—a type of Christ, who overcame the world. "Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world." That is what Jesus says in His last message there to the apostles. So what did Christ see in Jacob? A slice of Himself. Something, a character trait that was absolutely necessary in making it to the end. He endured in his struggle to please God, to do what God wanted him to do. In the same manner, the Israel of God, the elect, are the ones who, having come out of this sinful world, struggle and strive and keep on, keep on keeping on, if you will, keep on struggling and striving so that they can be transformed into Christ's image.

Please go with me to I John 4. All the way at the other end of the Book, and we will see how the same apostle John as in the letters to the seven churches uses this term overcome in this epistle. We will read the first four verses of I John 4. And then we will skip down to chapter 5 and read the first five verses there. So he writes to these people,

I John 4:1-4 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

I John 5:1-5 Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who has begotten of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. And this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His

commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

These verses give us insight into John's understanding of the term *overcoming*, especially *what* we are to overcome. In chapter 4 in those first four verses, the enemy is the false prophets who have the spirit of Antichrist, false teachers. So we have to overcome what the false teachers preach, these agents of Satan trying to get his way into the church. We know that these false teachers speak lies and deceive about Christ, particularly. That is what he is drawing the attention to here, that they are preaching a false Christ, saying that He did not come in the flesh. And so he tells them that you are to overcome these false teachers.

He says here in verse 4, "You are of God, little children, and *have* overcome them because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." We are promised victory because of Christ's presence in us. He gives us the strength to do these things. He gives us the will to do these things, the power to do these things. And if we trust in Him, then we will overcome. If we stay true to Him and the truth that He taught, we will ultimately prevail over these false teachings and false teachers.

Now, in chapter 5, it is a different enemy. The same ultimate source but the enemy is the world, and we can include in that all the world's influences on us. (By the way, this in verse 4.) What we see before verse 4 in chapter 5 are these other things that he says we need to do. We need to believe Christ is the Son of God, or believe that Jesus is the Christ, and we must love those who love Him—the brethren. We have got to serve the children of God. We have got to keep His commandments, and this actually reveals another enemy, in a positive way. But it is still an enemy that we have to overcome, and the enemy in the first three verses there is ourselves. Because we, first of all, have to overcome the enmity of our human nature for God and His laws if we are ever going to love God, love His people, serve them, and keep His commandments. That is the first domino, if you will, that has to fall. Of course, God does a great deal in making sure that domino falls by what He does for us as we begin our conversion.

In Romans 8:7 it says that our carnal nature hates God's way and will not be subject to God. Our carnal nature is full of enmity, of hatred. We also have the problem that we are self-centered and loving others goes against our nature. We would much prefer to love ourselves. That is always human nature's first go-to desire—to get for the self—and then others can get the dregs, or the crumbs, however you want to look at it. Really, human nature has shown that we are all just narcissists of varying degrees, some are more so, some are less. But we are all staring at ourselves all the time, reflecting on what we are. And we all want what is best for *us*, and we have strange ideas about what is best for us. They are not in line with what God thinks is best for us. So we have to overcome that self-centeredness, that narcissism, that love for self, so that we can do what God wants us to do.

But the only way that we can do these things is if God does something to change our nature, or to *begin* to change our nature, and if He gives us the strength to overcome all of these pulls and influences away from Him. And of course, that happens when He gives us grace and He gifts us with His Spirit. Those are the two essential things: He gives us grace, this favor, this pardon from our sins, brings us into a right relationship with Him, and He also gives us the Holy Spirit so that we can have the power, part of His mind, to start this process of overcoming. He is the ultimate source of our ability to overcome.

By the time we get down to verse 4 here in chapter 5, John wraps all of this up into one small phrase. He says, "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith." Then in verse 5, he defines this "our faith" as believing that Jesus is the Son of God. He kind of narrows it down to that particular thing—that we love Jesus Christ and we believe that He is the Son of God and all that entails. So it is our faith in Christ, in His power, and in the truth that He teaches that allows us first to love God, and then we love our neighbor. And we keep His commandments because we believe Him, and we believe that He helps us, we are willing to do as He says.

That is what it all comes down to—our faith. Without trust in Him as the bedrock of all of this—both at our calling and as we continue in faith in Him—we would do none of these things. We would not love God. We would not love neighbor. We would not keep the commandments. But because Christ has broken through, awoken us, given us an understanding, and we

trust Him, then we are willing to take those steps forward. It all starts there with our trust in Him. That is why it says here, we get the victory, we overcome the world, because of our faith in Him. That is the only way it happens.

If we did not have that faith in Him, what would we do? What would we be like? We would be like all those other people who have not been called and chosen. We would be railing against God. We would be hating our neighbors and knifing them in the back if it suited us, and we would be going our own way. It is only the breakthrough of Jesus Christ into our lives and our trust in Him, that makes overcoming possible.

Let us go to Revelation now. I do not want to go to the letters of the seven churches yet. I want to go to chapter 12 first, this encapsulated history of the true church, if you will. I want verses 7-11. In this section, in this passage, God gives us a three-part formula for overcoming Satan. It will work during the Day of the Lord, it will work right now, but we need three parts here.

Revelation 12:7-11 And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. [Verse 11 is what we were aiming for.] And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death."

Here is that three part formula that he gives us for overcoming the dragon. It is very easy to see these three parts: by the blood of the Lamb, by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. Let us take these one by one and kind of get an understanding of what he means here.

Actually, by the blood of the Lamb could mean several things, because the blood of the Lamb is very efficacious and very broad in what it does. It does several things. His blood was shed for the remission of our sins. His blood opens the way to God through the veil. His blood ratifies the New Covenant. His death—shedding of blood—destroyed the power of the Devil. It says that in Hebrews 2. His blood, as being the propitiation, appeases God's wrath. They are all linked together, in a way, but they could all be taken separately. And there are other things we could probably throw in there besides. I think it is best not to confine ourselves to any one of these things but to include them all. That is, the blood of the Lamb means the whole finished work of Christ in our behalf. What He has done for us because John 15:5 says, without Christ, we can do nothing, or as He says it there "Without Me, you can do nothing."

This is the place where John started in I John 5, with Christ, our faith in Him, and this is where this starts as well. Our overcoming, Satan, in this case, in particular, starts with all the work that Christ does and still does in our behalf. So it is all those things that are finished and it is all those things that He keeps on doing because we are saved by His life, are we not? That is what it says in Romans 5. So it is not just His death that was efficacious for us but His life as well. But now His life—that He is there and He is on his throne and He is Head of the church and He is working with us as individuals to bring us into His own image—that is what helps us to overcome. That is the main 99% of it all, I think. What Jesus has done and what Jesus continues to do. We have to cling to Him like Jacob, to overcome. Our strength in overcoming comes from Him.

Now the second part: By the word of their testimony. This could be alternatively translated "by the message of their witness." That is, the example that they leave in the way they live their lives by faith. So it is what we *do*. It is how we live. It is how we go out to our jobs and perform what we do all day, it is how we interact with the grocery clerk or the lady in the retail store. It is how we act with our neighbors. It is everything that we do. What is the record of your life? If someone were to go into court and give testimony about your character, would they characterize you as Christlike, Christian? Would they say that you are good and kind and loving and forbearing and all of those things that the fruit of the Spirit show? See, that is

how you overcome—by how you live your life, if you live your life in a Christlike way.

Those who overcome are true to the teachings of their Savior. They not only believe the truth, but they live it out for all to see. They change! How many people change? Almost nobody really changes, but God's people do. They change from their carnal lives when they were uncalled to the godly way that Christ's teaching produces.

The third thing is that "they did not love their lives to the death." They do not cling to their physical lives. They are willing to sacrifice themselves because their hope is in the resurrection from the dead, not in this life. Everything that they seek is beyond the grave. Despite persecution, denial of work, physical pain, physical privation, and even death, they persevere and continue in faith, believing and living the truth. They endure, they endure to the end. This kind of self-sacrifice is a facet of the love of God. Agape love has a lot to do with sacrificing the self. A person who truly loves God will do anything to maintain his relationship with Him. He puts God first, even before his own life.

So these three things are necessary for overcoming. By the blood of the Lamb. By all that Christ has done, by all the foundation that He has given us, and all the things He continues to do, we overcome Satan by the message of our lives, the message of our witness, and we overcome him by not loving our lives to the death.

Let us finally, as we head into the homestretch here, get into these seven churches and the "he who overcomes" statements. Commentators tell us that the "he who overcomes" statements are rewards for those who overcome, who are conquerors, who are victorious. Most of the commentators are of a Protestant bent. That is, they are of the variety that sees Christ doing it all for us. You know, it was all grace, there is no works, and so they have very little to say about our part in, let us say (well, they would hate this word), earning these rewards or qualifying for these rewards or, what we do as we would go through our lives to make sure that those rewards are assured.

So these commentators generally say that the overcomers are victorious in Christ and they essentially say that all they do is maintain their belief. Call

upon the name of the Lord and you will be saved. Believe in Christ and you will be saved. Probably about 80% or 90% of the commentators will go only that far, but we have come to see over the years that it is far more than that. Overcomers rely on Christ and His finished work and His continuous support, that is a given. But they also cooperate with Him, and they participate with Him through striving, working, struggling to put on godly character, and endure to the end. So we know, as I mentioned last week I believe it was, that Philippians 2:12-13 tells us that we have work to do. But God does the work. Let us read that again, just so it is fresh in our minds that this is a cooperative work. Paul writes:

Philippians 2:12-13 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

Very clearly a cooperative effort there. You work, you do the things you are supposed to do. You keep the commandments, you believe in Christ. You step out in faith. You do this, you do that. You have to live your life, and then Christ will work in you, the Father will work in you so that you do His will, give you the strength to do these things. But it must be cooperative. It has to be both working together. And we will see this in these letters to the seven churches in their rewards here. That there was something that Christ wanted them to overcome, maybe two or three things, depending on the church. But there were specific things that they really had to work on. We will see some of these as they come out. We are going to go through these one at a time and we should be able to go through them fairly quickly.

Revelation 2:7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God."

This is clearly a promise of eternal life in the presence of God. That is, we will be there for time without end with Him and we will participate and enjoy all the joys that there are in the presence of God, all the joys of paradise.

But what did they specifically have to overcome, these Ephesians? What was it that was their problem that they needed to overcome? As I mentioned last week in the repentance sermon, the Ephesians' problem was internal. They had a problem of the heart. They had to overcome their battle-hardened nature. Remember, they had done great things in holding off the false teachers. But somewhere along the way, they had lost their ability to love Christ and neighbor. They had left their first love and they were in danger of losing their place in the church because their love had dwindled down to nothing.

All they were were warriors, so they had to overcome their fighting nature. It was not like Jacob. Jacob loved to fight, too, but he did it for the right reasons. These people lost that somewhere along the line, and they just were combating everybody and everything. I take it they had a hard time, let us say, in services or with the other people because they saw everybody as an enemy, or a potential enemy. That idea had taken over their lives, and they needed to learn to stop battling each other and all those those things that they were doing and learn to serve. That is what love is. Self-sacrifice and service. So if I could put it in one way, they were imbalanced. They were all about fighting the enemy, and they needed to return to an equilibrium where they could do that, but with love.

Revelation 2:11 [The church of Smyrna] "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."

The Smyrnans, if you remember from last week, are not told to repent of anything. They were pretty good people, but they still had to overcome. Even though you are not given something specifically to repent about, you still have a life of overcoming, do you not? You have to overcome those hidden sins and whatnot that are not up to snuff, as it were, to match the character of Jesus Christ. There is always something more that we should overcome and put behind us. So they were good Christians. Christ says they were able to face persecution with courage and faith, but they were not perfect by any means. Their reward for overcoming is again eternal life. But it is interesting. It says here "you shall not be hurt by the second death." I actually want to read verse 10 here, too, because it says,

Revelation 2:10 "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

We have here a little bit of a hint of something that they probably needed to overcome. I will qualify this in a lot of ways because it is just a hint. And what I think it is is that their main thing that they had to overcome here was *fear*. They had to make sure that they would overcome all the fears that any person would naturally have facing persecution and upcoming death. So He tells them, "You've done great in these persecutions that you faced so far, but there is ten days coming that are really bad. Don't fear, overcome your fears. Maintain your faith."

Revelation 2:17 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. 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."

I have kind of developed my idea of what all this means since the sermon I gave a month or two ago on Pergamos. Pergamene's here are promised hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name, all of which tend to be symbols of eternal life with God with various perks that they, as Christians, were denied even though they were citizens of Pergamos. Remember Pergamos, one of the problems was they had these guilds and if you wanted to be in these guilds, you had to attend their guild feasts. And you had to do all the stuff with the Greek and Roman gods and to be a member of the church, you really could not do that. Some of this was creeping into the church of Pergamos, and they were beginning to compromise and attend these feasts so that they would have work, they would have a way to support themselves.

So if you were to be faithful, if you are a Pergamene, you would not get any of the perks that would come to other Pergamene citizens for doing these things. But Jesus promises them that if they are faithful, He will give them the perks, but much better. Hidden manna may represent a reward for denying themselves attending the guilds feasts. What do you do at a feast?

You eat, right? Is that not what a feast is all about? Eating and drinking? Having a good time? Well, He says, He will give them hidden manna, something mysterious and strange, but something to eat, if you will, even better than what they were denied while living in Pergamos.

The white stone may represent special admission to God's Family as they were denied admission to prominent events because they were Christians. The new name may symbolize a sterling reputation that they could not have in Pergamos because they were the hated Christians, ones who did not go to the guild feasts, who did not participate in the city's activities.

Of course, they had to overcome the sins that are mentioned here. But perhaps one of their major problems was that they envied their fellow citizens, and they had this feeling that they were being short-changed, not able to have all the good things in life. And so Jesus says, "I'll give you these things in spades. Just be faithful. If you overcome, you'll have way, way more than you ever would have had in Pergamos."

So to me, the thing that they really had to overcome was their envy and this feeling that they were not getting what they deserved in life, out of life.

Revelation 2:26 "He who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations."

The Thyatirans were worse than the Pergamenes. Remember, there is kind of a three step church line here where it goes from bad to worse and to worst. The Thyatirans were in the middle here, they were somewhere between the Pergamenes and the Sardians in terms of how corrupt they were. They had similar sins to those in Pergamos only they were deeper, or worse sins. Remember all the sexual immorality and idolatry that was there in Thyatira? The faithful remnant is told to hold fast what they had because remember He had given these people who were compromising and had gone corrupt time to repent and they had refused. So He tells these people, the remnant, that they just need to hold fast to what they had.

But it is very interesting that Jesus promises them power over the nations and the Morning Star. That is Christ Himself. That is a pretty great reward! Power over the nations and Christ Himself. Now, to me, this indicates that

they must overcome grave spiritual weaknesses. That is why the whole church was very corrupt. There were just a few that had not gone that way and believe that false prophetess, that Jezebel. They also had to overcome their willingness to be led by false teachers and their affinity, if you want to put it that way, for corruption.

Now think of those three things I just mentioned. They had to overcome grave weaknesses. They had to overcome their willingness to be led by false teachers. And they had to overcome their affinity for corruption. Think about this in terms of the reward. God says I will give you power over the nations if you overcome. Do you not think that if someone overcomes those three things—weakness, whisperers, like false teachers, and corruption—that sounds to me like you would actually be a pretty good leader. You have seen the worst of humanity. You have *been* the worst of humanity. But you have overcome it and now you see the light and you know what is right and good. You have gone through all of these experiences and know how human nature works. Who better to have power over the nations as one who has seen how it works and yet has overcome it? At least that is the way I look at it here.

Revelation 3:5 [Sardis, the dead church.] "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."

They are promised white garments, their name not erased from the Book of Life, and Christ's confession of their name before the Father.

This church is spiritually running on fumes, so they have a lot to overcome—a great deal to overcome. As I mentioned in my last sermon on Sardis, they were worldly almost to the point of being unconverted again. They had to overcome a mindset of desiring a good reputation in the eyes of the world. Remember, that was their problem. They wanted the world to see them just like them. So they had to take their eyes off of any kind of reputation that they would have in the world and instead fear God and fear what He thought of them, which is very similar to Laodicea. But I will not will not go any further with that.

Revelation 3:12 "He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and 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."

Philadelphia, like Smyrna, is another that is hardly criticized. The only bit of criticism that you can find in it is that they "have a little strength." Jesus promises to make him a pillar in the temple where He will reside forever, and the overcomer gets the Father's, Christ's, and New Jerusalem's name on him.

The pillar represents strength and stability as opposed to weakness, and the new names symbolize *total* identity with God. So if there is anything that a Philadelphian needs to do, it is he needs to overcome his lack of power, lack of strength. Now the strength comes from Christ, which makes me wonder if he is doing some of these things on his own strength. And there is also a mention there about those "who say they are Jews and are not," but are a synagogue of Satan. It seems like the Philadelphians also have to resist and overcome those who push Judaism on them. Just kind of interesting.

Revelation 3:21 [to Laodicea] "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."

Finally, we get to the last church here. The Laodicean overcomer is promised a seat on Christ's throne. He has got a lot to overcome. Poor self-judgment, lack of zeal, poor character, lack of righteousness, and maybe worst of all, a distant relationship with Jesus Christ.

Now if he overcomes all those things, he deserves to sit on a throne with Christ. I mean, that is a heavy plate of overcoming that he has to do. But notice the problem, which is, they have a distant relationship with Jesus Christ. The reward is a *very close* relationship with Jesus Christ. They both sit on the same throne. That is pretty close, side by side.

Let us finish in Revelation 21, where the last of the overcoming statements is made.

Revelation 21:7 He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.

Here we have the ultimate promise to those who overcome all things—an eternal sonship in God's Family are on the table. That is what God is dangling out here for us to achieve. It is possible. It is right there. It is within our grasp. All we have to do is strive to purify our character into the image of Jesus Christ and endure to the end. All we have to do is be like Jacob and do not let go, no matter what happens until you receive the blessing with Christ's help. It is definitely possible. We could even say, all but guaranteed. You can do it!

He who has an ear to hear, let him hear!