

Change And Hope

God's Help in Overcoming

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As I was starting to prepare this sermon, I thought of all of our years in the church and the friends that we have made. I remembered all of the wonderful Feasts of Tabernacles that we attended and the many good times. I also thought of the good correction that really helped to shape our lives and helped us to raise our families. Most of all, however, I was thankful for the truth that was given to us, that opened our minds, and gave us hope in the future that God has in store for each of us.

At our baptism, we were told to "count the cost." For many of us who have been in the church for upwards of forty years, the cost at that time did not seem too bad. Surely, we could really work to overcome for a short period of time. The place of safety was sure to be ours soon, with Mr. Armstrong leading us; and we would go as a large body to a location (probably Petra) that Mr. Waterhouse labeled as "the place of final training." Some even had small backpacks, with walking shoes and a few changes of clothes, at the ready in the back of their cars.

The world at that time would be suffering greatly as Germany rose up, while we were safe and sound. That was the general thinking in the early church.

Am I saying this cannot happen? Of course not! I am not sure how God will choose to work things out.

We heard, that shortly before Mr. Armstrong's death, he told Mr. Tkach to "get the people ready!" That was indeed encouraging, because that seemed to indicate that we would be fleeing fairly soon. Then began the doctrinal changes, slowly at first; then, in conjunction with the changes picking up speed, people began to leave. This, in turn, produced marking of those who left and, of course, in conjunction with that, came much animosity and separation of long-time friends.

New groups formed, with many different approaches. These new groups ebbed and flowed with members as they tested the waters in these different organizations, and many strange ideas came with those who tested the waters.

It took several years for the groups to begin to settle out. In this, one's imagination could justify the thought that those who just did not understand had been separated from those whom God would take to the place of safety, so "it must be soon"—but now fifteen years have gone by, and we are still here. Our promise at baptism—to endure until the end—has now taken on a much deeper meaning. It is not going to be a short period of time

In addition to the problems that attend getting older, such as poor health, having family members falling ill, and the losing of mates, we find the world around us rapidly coming apart. We see nationwide gambling sapping the money and the strengths of people that cannot afford it, trying to get rich quick. We see the pornography business doing an estimated 57 billion dollars a year in every corner of our country and the world, breaking up homes and destroying young people from age twelve up. We see a determination in the Muslim world to destroy us, and we are in a war that appears to be un-winnable. Homosexuality has risen to unbelievable heights, with those involved working at having the courts sanction same sex marriages and having huge "gay" rights days.

We see the Ten Commandments attacked and removed from public buildings and the principles of the Christian religion not being able to be discussed in school while other religions might be taught. The "church world" in this country has become ineffective, every year shrinking further and further from usefulness to the people of the country.

We could go on and on with the negative changes that have transpired over these last years, but summed up, we see our country and other nations lost and floundering in confusion, headed for destruction. In short, we see a nation and we see people that have rejected God! This weighs on us, just as it did Jesus Christ. It hurts, and we sigh and cry as Jesus Christ did.

Luke 19:41-44 Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it [that's how sad Jesus Christ felt over seeing what was taking place in Jerusalem], saying, "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ["If you had listened to what I've been teaching, you would have had peace."] For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation."

Jesus Christ saw, with great sadness, what was going to happen to the people; and He wants us to understand this, as well. What about us, though? Things have not gone as we thought they would.

A good question to consider: Have things gone the way that any of God's people ever thought they would—or did God lead those He called in a way that would promote the most growth in preparation for their future roles in His Kingdom? I have to say that the latter is exactly what God has done. Despite all that has taken place, we are called to endure in God's truth to the end.

Deuteronomy 8:1-3 "Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers. And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD."

This is for us, too; we have to come to understand this. Here we see a process through which God always puts His people. In this particular testing, we see that the people had God living among them. He caused the Red Sea to part, made bitter pools of water sweet, and twice brought no small stream of water out of a rock to satisfy the thirst of millions and their livestock—awesome, awesome miracles.

The people saw Him protect them against their enemies when Moses held up his arms, and the battle went their way. They had the example of their clothes not wearing out, nor their feet swelling. They had the miracle of quail coming into their camp, plus the wonder of manna feeding them over the years of their journey. It is important to note here that the test was over their lifetime!

They had been pulled out of the world of Egypt, with all of its false gods and practices of false religions. Of all the people ever to live, they were under the direct supervision and protection of the

living God. Even though life was difficult, they lived in an environment that was basically protected from the world around them. From this group of millions, the Bible records only Caleb and Joshua making it into the Promised Land. What went wrong?

I Corinthians 10:1-4 Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.

That rock was Christ, and He was right with them at every moment.

I Corinthians 10:5-14 But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. [Let nothing be an idol in your mind or in your life that pulls you away from God and that takes the place of worshipping God.]

In short, they complained about how Christ was leading them and did what they wished, and they never overcame. Paul wants us to see what temptations came upon God's people and tells us that, if we think we are standing, we had best be careful lest we fall.

We have Abraham, the father of the faithful, and he was tested. You would think that if anybody did not need to be tested, it was Abraham. In Genesis 12, we see God calling Abraham to leave His country and his kindred and travel to a country that God would show him. Abraham's response was to take Sarai, his wife, and leave.

Abram loved God, obeyed God; and God promised him an heir, saying that his progeny would be as the sand of the sea. Abram believed God, and it was accounted to him as righteousness. God watched and worked with Abram successfully for many years and promised him a son by Sarai. God visited him personally, telling him to walk before Him perfectly, and said, "I will make a covenant between you and Me and will multiply you exceedingly, and you will be the father of many nations." God changed his name from Abram to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah.

In Genesis 21, we read of Isaac's birth. God had been working with Abraham for about twenty-five years. Isaac grew, to what age we do not know, but probably another eighteen or nineteen years.

Genesis 22:1-2 Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

What a tremendous test that was for Abraham! Isaac must have been a wonderful son to allow himself to be bound and tied and put on the rock where he was going to be sacrificed.

Genesis 22:10-12 And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" So he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."

This, of course, is what God must be able to say about each of us. He is going to find that out by the way that we live our lives.

The history of God's people always shows their testing and their enduring. Even though we are not being tested as they were, I would like to go through Hebrews 11 so that we know what is taking place. The question that applies to us is asked immediately in Hebrews 12.

Hebrews 11:24-29 By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter [he had Egypt at his feet; he could have had anything that he wanted.], choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin [he had no other idols.], esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. [The reward is coming for each one of us.] By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, lest he who destroyed the firstborn should touch them. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land, whereas the Egyptians, attempting to do so, were drowned.

I am going to paraphrase the rest: When Israel left Egypt with a high hand, having been given much wealth, did they picture the testing and perfecting that would be theirs, with the crossing of the Red Sea being just the beginning of many years of tests and trials? I do not think that they did. They thought that they had been freed and that they could do what they wanted now. God said, "No, I am going to teach you, and you are going to change."

The facing of the solid, fortified city of Jericho required trusting in obedience to what God commanded, even though it seemed improbable that mere marching around a city could ever bring it down. They obeyed, and God reacted. It may sound simple in the reading that Rahab had to stand up for what God was doing against her city, taking the chance that she and her family would be discovered and killed. How many concerned thoughts ran through her mind from the time that the spies left until the end of the battle, yet she remained faithful?

What of Gideon? He was the least in his father's house, poor—and he was asked to free Israel from the Midianites and Amalekites and other peoples of the east. He had to step out in faith, with only

three hundred men, to free Israel. He did what God asked him to do, just as we have to trust God in what He tells us to do.

Barak followed Deborah the prophetess' summons from God to overthrow Sisera. His life did not just go along; he was required to physically step out in faith and do what God wanted done.

Jephthah defeated the Ammonites upon God's commands, rising from the obscurity of being born of a harlot and ending up judging Israel for six years. His life was filled with difficulties, not the least of which was being rejected by his family because he was a bastard.

Samson, after a tumultuous and difficult life of ignoring and taking God for granted, finished his race in a way that glorified God.

David struggled through the life to which God called him. He had to fight war after war, the intrigues of the court, his own flaws and mistakes. His was a life that was anything but easy, but he endured and remained faithful in his love and obedience to God to the very end. This is what God wants from us.

Samuel judged a people that did not wish to have God rule over them. He was faithful in his calling, and his was not an easy life. The people rebelled at the end.

Regarding God's prophets: How many people wanted to be a prophet? You had to go into town, where everybody hated you. You had to tell the town their sins, be nice, treat the old people well, and not steal. The prophets were killed in the performance of their duty, because as it was then, it is today. We do not want anyone telling us our sins.

Was there pressure on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? They were the minority that believed in God and had to face the fiery furnace. What about Daniel, thrown into the den of starving lions? I am going to read to you from the New English Bible:

Hebrew 11:34-40 (NEB) All of God's people were at one time weak and without strength, and yet grew strong in the trials they found themselves in. Women received back their dead raised to life. Others were tortured to death, disdaining release to win a better resurrection. Others again had to face down jeers and flogging, even fetters and prison bars. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were put to the sword, and they went about dressed in skins of sheep and goats, in poverty, distress and in misery. They were too good for a world like this. They were refugees in deserts and on the hills; hiding in caves and holes in the ground. These also, one and all, are commemorated for their faith, and yet they did not enter upon the promised inheritance, because with us in mind, God had a better plan, that only in company with us (upon whom the end of the age has fallen), should they reach perfection.

Hebrews 12:1-3 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

We can see here that even Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, was tested, as well—lest we think we are not going to be tested. At this time, we may find it hard to relate to those in Hebrews 11 because we are not faced with the type of trials that they faced. Those trials may well come, but our trial or testing is one of perseverance in these times. Nobody seems to care about anything, where anything goes; it does not seem matter what one does—yet we are to persevere in the truth and in righteousness and in being close to God.

Luke 21:19 By your patience possess your souls.

As stated in Ephesians 1, God chose us in Him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love. What an awesome thing of which to think! I hope that we really appreciate the truth that we have been given. God has predestined us unto the adoption of children, by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.

God the Father has set a length of time to teach Israel and all of mankind that they cannot govern themselves apart from Him. To accomplish the calling and training needed to secure those who would be in the Family of God, He has a date that does not appear to be too far into the future (based on world conditions) when all will be accomplished. I do not know what that date is. Our job, then, is to love and truly care for one another, as Martin Collins said in a recent sermon, to endure and grow and overcome until the time is fulfilled that God has set forth for all to be completed. That is our job: to be obedient to God and to love one another.

When we first looked at the plan of God years ago, we saw the World Tomorrow, with an environment that is Satan-free. We considered the healings that will take place physically as well as mentally, and we pictured a world at peace and the animals turned from being carnivorous. People wanted to have a pet lion and things like this. It was really a very innocent time but a very wonderful time. Of course, we wondered at the thought of being changed from flesh to spirit, having eternal life, and being able to serve and travel throughout the heavens. It was all so very exciting.

However, the one thing we tended not to consider is that our job would be to endure and grow with the lessons that God would teach us. We must resist the pulls of this end time age so that we might be fully prepared to serve all of mankind, under the direction of God the Father and Jesus Christ. This is what every single one of us, young and old, is being prepared for now.

I Peter 1:2-4 Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.

As we go through trials and difficulties, Peter wants us to remember that we, of all people at this time, have an inheritance that nothing or no one can take from us. He wants us to see and to focus on this. If we hold the course, the inheritance is incorruptible and undefiled and will not fade away. It is protected and reserved for each one of us in heaven.

I Peter 1:5 Who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

The word translated "kept by God" is an interesting thing, used one time in the Bible. We all get down at times and feel discouraged, but Peter reminds us that God truly wants us! Because of this, we are kept by the power of God as being kept in a fortress, as Adam Clarke puts it. *Barnes Notes* says it is being "kept by a garrison that watches over you when temptation approaches." This is the only place where this word is used in the Bible. We are kept through faith in the plan of God for our soon-coming salvation and the world's eventual salvation.

I Peter 1:6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

I personally think that this generation has been called to see the culmination and the effect of sin on this earth, that we will have a full understanding of mankind reaching his peak, if you will, in garbage, in wrong thinking and actions.

He says that the gold will wear away over time; but faith, if proven pure and genuine, will last throughout eternity. This is for what God is looking. Because of this wonderful calling, what is our responsibility?

I Peter 1:13-14 Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance.

He says that we are to roll up our sleeves, get ready, get busy, and get to work. We must not quit or let down. For all of us, at times, the fight gets long; Satan pushes at us to give in to our human nature; and we become weary—but God wants us to see the goal for which we are striving.

Revelation 14:1-5 Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder. And I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps. They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God.

The 144,000 have always seemed to be such an elite group of perfect people. I always viewed the 144,000 as being so precious and so special; and indeed, they are. However, when I mentioned this to Charles Whitaker, he rightly answered as to who they are: They are the widows who faithfully pray, all the faithful elderly, the young men and women who are true to their calling, the adults of Israel, and those of all the races who are grafted in, who keep their eyes on the Kingdom of God and are steadfast in overcoming. This is who the 144,000 are.

Revelation 14:12 Here is the patience of the saints; here are those that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.

Spiros Zodhiates, *Complete New Testament Word Study Dictionary*:

Here are those who are bearing up under, being patient, and having endurance. Here is the constancy in suffering in faith, or duty of the saints. Here are they that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ.

This is who the 144,000 are. They are the firstfruits of God. The part that always shakes me up is Revelation 14:5, "And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God." None of us feels perfect, yet these people are without fault. They made it.

Just what are the rewards set aside for the saints? I am going to read the many general rewards that encourage us onward and seem to apply to all who finish the course.

We are told in I Corinthians 6, that we will judge the world. Can you picture what it would like to judge the world? Could you straighten up Iraq with a rod of iron? You bet! We will judge the world with wisdom, and we will also judge angels.

Revelation 20:6 Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.

Revelation 5:10 states that we will be kings and priests, and rule on earth.

Revelation 2:7 To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

What is overcoming? It is continually working to obtain victory over all the sins that so easily beset us, to conquer them. God is talking about fighting against the addictions that plague us.

Revelation 2:11 He that overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.

Revelation 2:26 He that overcomes and keeps my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron.

Revelation 3:5 He that overcomes, the same shall be clothed in white raiment, and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father and His angels.

Revelation 3:12 To him that overcomes will I make a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go no more out, and I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God which is New Jerusalem which comes down out of heaven and I will write upon him My new name.

Revelation 3:21 To him that overcomes will I grant to sit with Me on My throne, even as I also overcame and am set down with my Father [indicating rulership].

In other words, you will share in rulership in the Kingdom of God.

All of the rewards seem to apply to all of us, in one degree or another, but there is one that is very personal for each one of us:

Revelation 2:17 To him that overcomes I will give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone, a new name written, which no man knows except he that receives it.

What is the white stone? It has been supposed by some commentators that the hidden manna is great spiritual enlightenment to a very high degree, enough to produce great growth throughout eternity. That may be true; I do not know.

Adam Clarke wrote concerning the white stone, "It is supposed that by the white stone is meant the pardon or acquittal, and the evidence of it" is the white stone. It is a reference to a custom of the past that used a white stone to indicate a pardon and a black stone, condemnation. However, it seems to go much further than that: In the public games, those who conquered and won were given a white stone as a sign of victory.

This stone is referred to as a *tessera* stone. The *tessera* stones at the Roman games were "inscribed with different kinds of things, such as provisions, garments, gold or silver vessels, horses, mares, slaves, etc. These were sometimes thrown by the Roman emperors among the crowd in the theaters." Upon presentation of the stone, one could receive that which was written upon it. The *tesserae frumentariae* were tickets to receive so much grain or corn, with the name of the person who was to receive the quantity of grain inscribed on the stone.

"The most remarkable of these instruments were the *tesserae hospitales*," unusual stones "given as badges of friendship and alliance, and on which. . . was engraved, as a testimony that a contract of friendship had been made between the parties. . . This was carefully preserved, and handed down" from family to family.

Though we may not know exactly the use of this white stone, it would appear that it is given in an intimate, one-on-one meeting with Jesus Christ. At this time, He deeply thanks you for the great effort that you put forth and may well pledge something personal to you, giving you a special name of great encouragement that reflects who you are. Brethren, we may not know exactly the use of these things, but that is what it appears to be.

Romans 8:18-25 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. [You have just a little hint here of that glory:] For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

We can all take heart from what the apostle Paul says:

II Timothy 4:7-8 I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing.

Those who love His appearance will be those who have kept His commandments and are faithful. As the end of this age comes upon us, many focus on and put their faith in this or that scenario of how the end time will occur, but this is not what Jesus Christ wants. He wants our focus and faith on Him, as He encourages us:

Hebrews 13:1-3 Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. Remember the prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also.

In other words, is somebody sick or hurt or suffering? You need to put yourself in his shoes and really ask God to help him and bring him out of it.

Hebrews 13:4 Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.

Stay away from pornography and the garbage that is available today.

Hebrews 13:5-6 Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

I would like to amplify that. What He is saying is that He will never leave us; He will never, never cast us off. As long as we are working to do our part, He will be with us completely, through whatever we go. To me, that is so encouraging.

Brethren, let us set our mind to be the same as that of Jesus Christ, as He reveals to us in John 4:34: "My meat is to do the will of Him who sent me and finish His work."