

# Overcoming Is A Choice

We Stand Or Fall By Our Choices

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We hear a great deal about choice these days, and have for the past 30 to 35 years or so. The liberal left has taken the word “choice” as a kind of badge of honor, and now seemingly everything that is done in this country hinges on a person’s right to choose. It ultimately goes so far as to the murder of another human being—one’s own offspring—a right by choice.

Before the left hijacked the term “choice,” its philosophical meaning was, “An individual’s freedom to determine the moral course of his own life.” This is, of course, what theologians and philosophers call “free moral agency,” or “free will,” as in free choice—the ability to choose the course of one’s life in a moral dimension.

God gives us the freedom to choose our path, but it is clear in God’s Word that He has a path that He wants us to choose to take. God gives us the command in Deuteronomy 30:19 to choose life. But He sets before us both life and death, and it is our choice as to which way we want to go.

One of the modern authors whom I enjoy reading (and I look for his books when I visit a bookstore) is Harry Turtledove. I do not know if you are familiar with his works, but he is a classical historian by trade. I believe his expertise is in the Byzantine historical time frame. He is known in literature circles as the undisputed master for a niche genre called alternative history. He begins with a real historical setting or scenario, such as the American Civil War, the Spanish Armada, or Roman legions, and he changes one critical or significant fact, and then lets his imagination construct an alternative series of events based upon that one difference. In my opinion, it makes for fascinating reading, especially when it is in an area of history that you personally know well, and can see how this one change would indeed have affected something.

In the American Civil War scenario, he changes one event. In our real time line, in September 1862, fairly early in the war, a Confederate messenger lost General Robert E. Lee’s Special Order No. 191. If you know the story, this order was disguised as the wrapper for a couple of cigars that he stuffed into his pocket. He may have reached in for one of his cigars, and out popped the order onto the ground.

Special Order No.191 was indeed special—it detailed General Lee’s plan to invade the North in 1862. In the real story, a Union soldier found the orders, and rushed them to

the North's HQ and Major General George McClellan. When McClellan saw them, it was a gift from heaven. He had Robert E. Lee's plans, and Robert E. Lee did not know that he had his plans. What happened was that McClellan, knowing exactly where Lee was going to be with his army, met him at Antietam, in western Maryland, and after the bloodiest one-day battle, beat off the rebels who scurried back across into Virginia. That was the real story.

In Turtledove's book, "How Few Remain," instead of a Union soldier picking it up, a Confederate soldier behind the messenger found it, and he stuffed it into his pocket, and delivered it himself to the intended destination. So, in that book's scenario, Lee's plan worked, and catches McClellan by surprise in a place where he should not have been. Lee picks his own battlefield, and engages the Army of the Potomac, which is destroyed. Then Lee, having a free and clear road, bypasses Washington, D.C., and goes straight to Philadelphia encircling Washington, forcing the North to surrender. The South wins the war.

Just one seemingly minor event goes the other way, and history takes an entirely different turn. And it can turn on a choice. Perhaps if that soldier did not want a smoke, things would have been different. We could have been living now in the Confederate States of America.

In II Chronicles 34, there is an incident in the Bible where something like this could have occurred, in the life of Josiah, one of the last kings of Judah.

**II Chronicles 34:1-2** Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in the ways of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.

This is significant. Josiah is ranked right up there by King David. He walked in David's ways. He did not turn to the right or the left. Let us drop back to II Kings 23 and pick up one verse.

**II Kings 23:25** Now before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses; nor after him did any arise like him.

This puts him actually over King David and Hezekiah, both whom we consider to be

some of the best kings of Judah. This passage, however, says that there was no king like him before him, or after him. He was a paragon of what a king should be.

## **II Chronicles 35:20** After all this . . .

The previous scriptures had just gone through all of the good things that King Josiah had done—they found the law in the Temple, and he had read it aloud to the people—he had restored true worship—he had restored much of the Temple—he had kept the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread which had not been kept since the days of Hezekiah, the 55 year-long reign of Manasseh. So, it had been a long time since true worship had happened in Judah.

Then we have this (the events we are going to look at take place when Josiah is 39 years old):

**II Chronicles 35:20-25** After all this, when Josiah had prepared the temple, Necho king of Egypt came up to fight against Carchemish by the Euphrates; and Josiah went out against him. But he [Necho] sent messengers to him [Josiah], saying, "What have I to do with you, king of Judah? I have not come against you this day, but against the house [of Babylon] with which I have war; for God commanded me to make haste. Refrain from meddling with God, who is with me, lest He destroy you." Nevertheless Josiah would not turn his face from him, but disguised himself so that he might fight with him, and did not heed the words of Necho from the mouth of God. So he came to fight in the Valley of Megiddo. And the archers shot King Josiah; and the king said to his servants, "Take me away, for I am severely wounded." His servants therefore took him out of that chariot and put him in the second chariot that he had, and they brought him to Jerusalem. So he died, and was buried in one of the tombs of his fathers. And all Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah. Jeremiah also lamented for Josiah. And to this day all the singing men and the singing women speak of Josiah in their lamentations. They made it a custom in Israel; and indeed they are written in the Laments.

When King Josiah died, he made a huge hole in the nation of Judah. All of it teetered on a choice—one dreadful, tragic choice. Here is a young man, 39 years old, who had everything going for him. He was king. He was zealous. God was with him. Things were going great in the nation, and things were turning around on, basically, the strength of

Josiah. He was giving the leadership to the nation, and the people were following. And they loved him—the young, strong king. They had a new David, who was going to lead them into the future.

And then, in 609 BC, he makes a stupid choice. He decided to curry favor with Babylon, by taking on the Egyptian army who was marching to the aid of Assyria at the time. They, Assyria and Egypt, saw Babylon rising with the strength of Nebuchadnezzar their general, and his father, Nabopolassar their king moving westward against Assyria. And if Babylon was able to overcome Assyria, it would open up all Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, threatening Egypt. That is the way of conquerors. They are going to go as far as they can, and the way was clear if they could get past the combined armies of Assyria and Egypt.

In the meantime, Josiah stuck his finger in the air, and saw that the winds of change were going toward Babylon, so he decided to catch onto that, and come out against Egypt. If he could keep Egypt from arriving to the aid of Assyria, Babylon would have the free road, and Judah could then be a favored vassal state of the great Babylon. That is what Josiah chose. It was a stupid choice. I have no idea what he was thinking. I supposed that he was trying to save the nation, and he figured that was the way to do it.

The amazing thing here is that Necho warns him that God Himself would destroy Josiah and Judah for hindering Pharaoh from reaching Assyria. Now Josiah did not realize at the time that his choice and decision was a matter of life and death to him. Would he submit to God, or rebel against Him? That was the choice.

Now, maybe he did not believe Pharaoh was really speaking for God, but obviously the chronicler here understood that this was a true prophecy and command from God. But Josiah had other ideas, and he, instead of overcoming the temptation of political expediency, succumbed to it—and died.

It was not but a few years later that all of Judah fell to that general, now King Nebuchadnezzar. He was trying to curry favor with him. Nebuchadnezzar became king about 604 BC, the time of the first wave of Jews taken to Babylon. Judah completely fell by 586 BC or so.

One poor choice led to Josiah's death. All that magnificent potential died with him. One choice was all it took—one bad decision.

It is intriguing to think about how history might have changed had he chosen to heed Necho's warning. Would things have been delayed? Would Judah have had a

renaissance? Would Josiah have changed, and turned from God in his later years like some of his ancestors had done? Maybe this was a good thing.

I do not know. It is not written as a good thing. The lesson is for us to learn from. It is written as a lamentable thing because of his poor choice. But it is interesting to think of the alternative paths that might have been taken if he had chosen otherwise.

For us Christians, too, it is all about choice. We are required to choose each day whether we are going to follow God, or not. In reality, we must choose many times each day whether to follow righteousness, or sin. If we wish to overcome and grow, we must choose to do so.

I think that Billy Graham was wrong. It is not the "hour of decision." It is a *lifetime of decisions*. And our goal, if we are truly striving to please God, is to get every one of our decisions and choices right. Thank God that He is patient and merciful, because truthfully we get most of them wrong. And it is only by going through these choices time after time, and time again, making the right choices over a lifetime, that we eventually build righteous character with Him.

It is always good to touch bases with the holy day that we are observing. I want to read to remind us of today—the first day of Unleavened Bread. Remember the Days of Unleavened Bread commemorates Israel coming out of Egypt (sin).

**Exodus 13:3-10** And Moses said to the people: "Remember this day in which you went out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the LOORD brought you out of this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten. On this day you are going out, in the month Abib. And it shall be, when the LOORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, that you shall keep this service in this month. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LOORD. Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days. And no leavened bread shall be seen among you, nor shall leaven be seen among you in all your quarters. And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, 'This is done because of what the LOORD did for me when I came up from Egypt.' It shall be as a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the LOORD's law may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the LOORD has brought you out of Egypt. You shall therefore keep this ordinance in its season from year to year."

As we know, the Feast of Unleavened Bread is a memorial, a reminder of God bringing Israel out of Egypt. We sometimes get caught up in the idea of putting out sin from our lives—a type of leaven—that we tend to undervalue the fact that God also wants us to focus on what He did for Israel, and what He does for us.

It was only through the awesome power of God, and His watchful care over the people, that Israel was able to come out of Egypt. And in the same way, it was only through the awesome power of God, and His watchful care that we were able to reject this present evil world—rejecting its corruption, rejecting its ruler, Satan the Devil—and begin the journey to the Kingdom of God. He gives us grace, He says. He gets the ball rolling. He gives us the gifts. He gives us the strength. He points out the way. He gives us examples, and He is the example. All those things are so much more than what we have to do.

It is true that we have a part to play in all this. We had a part to play in coming out of this world. We have a part to play, now, as we journey toward His Kingdom. We do have a certain amount of control and responsibility in our walk toward the Kingdom of God, and it is seen in our reactions, and our responses to what God does for us.

And just as Israel had to choose to take advantage of God's deliverance of them from bondage, and physically walk out of Egypt, so we had a choice to do the same sort of thing when He called us out of this world. We had a choice to respond, or not to respond. We had to decide to answer God's call, and walk out of this world, following Jesus Christ, or reject it.

And since then, since that time that we answered that call, and decided to walk behind Him, every decision has been a choice to continue on that path, or to stray from it.

Now we remove leaven, symbolic of sin, this time of year from our homes and eat unleavened bread throughout the seven days of Unleavened Bread, to represent ridding our lives of sin, and living righteously (eating the unleavened bread). It is a two-part process; we get rid of the bad, and ingest the good and new. The physical act of cleaning our homes, and throwing away the leaven, symbolizes our individual choices made day-by-day, to identify sin in ourselves, and to remove it from our lives—not at just this time of year, but all year long. It is every day that we must do this. We must think, and observe ourselves. We have to wonder if we have allowed sin to creep in. And we have to consciously work on getting it out. This week is just a type of something that we should be doing all of the time, not just this 1/52<sup>nd</sup> of a year.

In the same way, eating unleavened bread symbolizes our individual every day

decisions to respond to God by doing what is good and righteous. Every day we should be thinking, when a situation comes up, whether driving on the road, or in a conversation with your boss, or co-worker—whatever it is that you are doing—every day there is a choice to respond in righteousness, rather than in sin.

We choose to overcome sin. And we choose to live a life of godliness and righteousness.

Despite what the Protestant churches say and preach in terms of grace—they so often say that Jesus has done it all for us—Christianity is by no means a passive religion. True Christianity is a religion of constant vigilance in a conscience endeavor—striving, struggling, and making choices to do what is right to please God.

Just think about this. If God had done it all for us, why is the Bible not only one verse long? “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son.” It could be John 3:16, “Here is your Bible.” “Oh wow! That is great! Thanks! I’m done now!”

But look at how thick this book is! It is almost 2,000 pages (depending on paper, and dimensions) worth of instruction. That is not God blathering because He had nothing else to do. Each word in this book is pure—purified seven times the Psalms say. It is written concisely. Everything there has value. Our Lord says, “You shall live by every word of God.” (Matthew 4:4, Luke 4:4, Deuteronomy 8:3) And He gave us many pages of words because there are many instructions for us to learn, and to follow.

If Christianity were just believing in Jesus and doing nothing more, then we would have a very little Bible. But no, God gave us a big Bible with lots of instructions, because He wants us to conform to the image of His Son. And that means that we must make right choices. We have to choose to conform to Jesus Christ. It is not going to be done for us. God will do a lot for us, but there is still our ability to choose that can turn things one way or another. God will not make the choice for us. He will make it clear what He wants us to do, and He will do His best to drive us in that direction. But ultimately, we have to choose. He does not want in His Kingdom anyone who does not want to be there, or anyone who will not conform to His way of life—His way of living life.

The Bible contains a lot of teaching about what we must do to be born into God’s Kingdom, and to please Him. I could have chosen any number of passages to go to, but this one I thought to be best for what I want to share with you. We will read parts of Isaiah 55 and 56.

**Isaiah 55:6-7** Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while

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He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LOORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.

**Isaiah 56:1-5** Thus says the LOORD: "Keep justice, and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come, and My righteousness to be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who lays hold on it; who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and keeps his hand from doing any evil." Do not let the son of the foreigner who has joined himself to the LOORD speak, saying, "The LOORD has utterly separated me from His people"; nor let the eunuch say, "Here I am, a dry tree." For thus says the LOORD: "To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, **and choose what pleases Me**, and hold fast My covenant, even to them I will give in My house and within My walls a place and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

In those few verses, did you notice all the choices that we have to make? It is a choice to seek the Lord. It is a choice to call upon Him. It is a choice to forsake one's way. It is a choice to forsake one's thoughts. It is a choice to return to the Lord. It is a choice to keep justice. It is a choice to do righteousness. It is a choice to keep from defiling the Sabbath day. It is a choice to keep one's hands from doing evil.

The eunuchs, here, chose to do what pleases God. I think you get the point after all this.

This mental and physical activity to do good, or conversely to forsake sin, begins with a choice—every one of them! The choices that we make may be conscious, where we actually think things through, where we get out the paper and pencil, putting down all the pros and cons and we weigh them in the balance, making an accounting, as it were, of what is good and what is evil, and then deciding which way we should go.

Or these choices can be habitual and automatic due to your consistent repetition in godly living. Conversely, they may be habitual and automatic in doing evil and wrong. But still, they are choices. Whether we think about them or not, they are still choices.

We would hope that they were habitual and automatic because they are ingrained, godly character that we have been building over the years, but we have an awful lot of ingrained ungodly character that we have built over the years, and we could just as easily follow that in making our choices. It does not matter, whatever they are, they are



choices and decisions that we make.

So, if we find sin in our life (and hopefully there are no glaring sins), and we are constantly battling problems, similar problems that keep coming up over and over again, and we just cannot seem to shake them, maybe we should consider the choices that we have been making, because these choices are leading to the problems that keep repeating. It is not because God is mad at you. And it may not be because Satan has personally put a target on your back and is taking practice at you. Do not put all the blame on somebody else, whether God, Satan, or anybody else. We make a lot of dumb decisions every day! So if we have problems, and they keep going on, and seem to be habitual problems, I would think that if this were happening to me, I would be a pretty big cause of them myself.

The choices that we make can lead to the problems we face, or the good and peaceful times that we have.

It is not always that cut and dried, and I understand that. But, it is something that we should think about. If we have problems, and they are habitual and/or constant, then we should consider the choices that we have been making.

I want to give a series of verses in Matthew 4 to show a good choice on one hand, and a bad choice on the other.

**Matthew 4:18-22** And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." They immediately left their nets and followed Him. Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.

Is that not interesting that he called the two sons, but not their father? What a great example.

**Matthew 9:9** As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him.

Notice that in every one of these cases, these five men, Jesus said, "Follow Me," and they up and went with Him. Obviously, as we know from John 1, this was not the first time that Peter, Andrew, James, and John had met with Jesus, but even so, when Jesus calls them, they do not hesitate at all. They immediately followed Him. They make a firm, conscious decision to leave their occupation, even their father, and cast their lot with Jesus—they give it up.

We know that later on, about three years or so, they fled. They hid when He was arrested. Peter denied Him three times. And they all went back to fishing after the crucifixion and resurrection. Yet, their choice here was decisive. They made the right choice. Peter says later:

**Matthew 19:27** Then Peter answered and said to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You."

What a great example of decisive choice. We see a similar thing in Mark 10, but it does not turn out quite so well. This is Mark's version of the Rich Young Ruler.

**Mark 10:17** Now as He [Jesus] was going out on the road, one came running . . .

Notice this that one came running! "(Pant, pant). Gotta catch up with Jesus. Here He is! I might not get this chance again." So he comes up to Jesus, breathless, and asked Him,

**Mark 10:17-21** ..."Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" [Great question!] So Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Do not defraud,' 'Honor your father and your mother.'" And he answered and said to Him, "Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth." Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me."

It is the same invitation that He gave Peter, James, John, Andrew, and Matthew, and the seven others.

**Mark 10:22** But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Bad choice! Very poor choice! He had the same opportunity as those other disciples, but in contrast, he blows it by making a wrong choice. He chooses his lifestyle of wealth, and prestige, and influence over eternal life, which, from his own lips, was what he was seeking! Jesus was there, giving him the answer to his question, everything he wanted. This young ruler even came to the right Person and Source to get that answer. But he blows it.

When push came to shove, he chose his money and position over God. He chose his money and position over self-sacrifice, over submission, over charity, and service to others. He chose the status-quo rather than rocking the boat. I think that we can all understand that, but it is interesting to see the contrast between these two very big choices.

Now, this big choice confront us only once in a lifetime. You either answer God's calling, or you do not. But, sometimes, after the big choice has been made (I am talking to you members of God's church), and we have made the right choice, we sometimes begin to overlook the small mundane choices we face every day. The little ones: "Will I speed, or not? Will I litter, or not? Will I lie, or not? Will I take advantage, or not? Will I curse, or not?" I could go on. We all know the litany of sins that we can do. They are little things, and they are big things. But we all have to face them every day.

It is in these choices that the possibility of overcoming exists. These little choices make overcoming either possible for us, or impossible. Think about it. It is far easier to make a lot of little right decisions until they become a habit and firm, convicted character, than it is to face a mammoth decision all at once, with little or no experience in making smaller, correct ones.

Let us say, for illustration's sake, that you are given the job of cutting down a giant sequoia out in northern California—with a table knife. Now, if you spend a long time making stroke after stroke, stroke after stroke, you could indeed cut down that sequoia. But, if you had to do it in a day—the big decision, this has to be done, right now, decide right now what you are going to do—and all you had was a table knife—you could not do it. You are unprepared for it.

But if you had been making small decisions—small strokes—for a long time, and finally

the boss said that it had to come down today, you could go, and it would come down, because you were used to doing it for a long period of time. You had made all the small decisions, and when it had to come down, it could be done.

I know, maybe it is not the best illustration, but think about it—if you do the little ones, the big ones come easier.

Now, the word “overcome” in one form or another is mentioned in the Bible only 33 times. It is interesting to me that it is only that many. It is interesting that it is 33, for that matter. But, in some of these occurrences, the context is speaking of something other than overcoming sin. Usually it is about somebody having to overcome some enemy, or maybe somebody has to overcome the effects of wine, or overcome sleep, or some other such thing. That is not what we are talking about when overcoming sin.

All but 7 of these 33 are found in the New Testament. And, most of these examples in the Old Testament are the other ones—not directly tied to overcoming sin. By far, the book that has the most instances of the word “overcome,” or “overcomer,” or “overcoming,” or any other similar form, is the book of Revelation. What this tells me, is that overcoming is a major activity of the church at the end time, because Revelation is an end-time book, and God is looking for His people to be overcomers. In each one of the seven letters to the churches, is an admonition at the end of each section to overcome. And it says there that if they do overcome, they will have a great reward.

“To the overcomers, I will give this, or do that.” And they all have to do with eternal life, and our great reward in the Kingdom of God.

Another book with the word overcome in it, is I John. There are six instances of overcome in some form in that little epistle. And they are split, as we saw in Martin’s recent sermon, between overcoming the world, and overcoming Satan. John, of course, is the one who recorded that Jesus said, “Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world!”

So, in the book of Revelation, there are 11, and in I John there are 6, which make 17; and in the gospel of John there is one more. That makes 18 occurrences out of the 33 total biblical usages of overcoming in John’s writings. What does that tell you?

Remember, John was the last of the original twelve. He was the one whom God used to finish the canon of Scripture, and put the New Testament of the Bible together for our use. And 18 times in those last books that were written, the apostle John talks about overcoming. It really is God who is focusing our minds on this issue of overcoming. Overcoming is a primary importance in this time of encroaching mounting evils, and

anti-God attitudes. It is for now!

I hope that in my sermons on Noah, I have been getting the point across that what is described there in Genesis 6 is very similar to what we are having to face now—the absolute corruption of mankind. And a similar disastrous catastrophe is about to occur. But this time it will be by fire.

So, we must overcome this, like Noah did. He was given grace, and so have we. He had been given a way of escape, and so have we. But, we must *overcome*.

It is surprising, then, thinking about all this, thinking about how few times the word overcome is in the Bible, to see that there are not more straightforward examples of overcoming in the Bible. We know that they are there, but they do not say, “Peter overcame his fear.” “Paul overcame his violent hatred.” We must read between the lines, and see the growth that becomes evident in these men. Obviously there are examples there for us to emulate.

Joseph overcame his precocious superiority, being the favorite son. Moses overcame (for the most part) his anger. Gideon overcame his timidity. Samson finally overcame his pride, and his profligacy in the end. Job overcame his self-righteousness. David overcame many, many wrong passions. Peter overcame his boastings, and his fears. Paul overcame his persecuting spirit. However, these stories do not teach us the process of overcoming, at least not very clearly. They are there, and we can pull them out, but there is one story in the Book that I think comes the closest to teaching us the process of overcoming—and that is the life of Jacob.

We are going to look at this man who started out as a crumb, and ended up as a cake (or something like that). Maybe started out as a lump of coal, but came out like a diamond (but still in the rough). He overcame. I want to start before he was born. Obviously, there is a lot on Jacob in the book of Genesis, so we are not going to be able to go through it all, but we are going to hit the highlights and see how he overcame.

**Genesis 25:21-28** Now Isaac pleaded with the LOORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LOORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If all is well, why am I like this?" So she went to inquire of the LOORD. And the LOORD said to her: "Two nations are in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger." So when her days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red. He was like

a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents. And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Before we go on through the rest of this, I want to point out here that we see some indications of Esau's and Jacob's character, even before they are born. They are in there duking it out with each other. They are obviously causing a lot of turmoil for Rebekah. She always felt like she had an upset stomach or something. But she was really worried about this, so she asked God what was going. And He gave her the answer.

But, when they came out it was obvious that this one, the non-hairy one, had his hand on the heel of his brother like he was about to ready pull him right back in for being the first out. And they saw that. They named the first one "hairy," and the second one they called, "heel catcher," or "supplanter." His name indicated deception. "This kid is going to get into all kinds of trouble, and first thing out, he is already trying to pull his brother down, trying to get what his brother had." So they called him "deceitful, supplanter; the one who is always trying to get the upper hand, looking for the advantage in everything."

It is interesting that when the description of these two men is given in verse 27, it basically said that Esau was a single-minded one-sided person. He loved to go out and hunt. He was a man of the field. He liked to be outdoors. But Jacob—it says here a "mild man," which is a silly translation, because it means a complete man—he liked to go into the tent and read and study books; he liked to hunt too, and cook. He was a go-getter—a complete man. He did not narrow himself down in on one thing. He was one who knew what he wanted, and went out and got it.

**Genesis 25:29-34** Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, "Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary." Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright as of this day." And Esau said, "Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?" Then Jacob said, "Swear to me as of this day." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Here we see Jacob, in the first vignette in his life, conniving to steal the birthright, and he does. It hardly even made him break a sweat. He was good at this, getting people to do what he wanted. He could trick them, finagle them; he could do most anything he wanted to get things his way. He could work it. He already put his mother around his little finger, and he stepped on his brother, and we find that he is going to cheat his dad, too. No matter who it is, he is going to get his way, and get what he wants.

In doing this, he gets the first thing, and now he wants the blessing too. We will not go through Genesis 27 today, but he and Rebekah work it out so that Jacob will disguise himself, and cook a dish like his brother does, and Isaac thinks, "Wow! Esau sounds an awful lot like Jacob. But, he is hairy. It must be him. Nobody is hairy like Esau." Then he finally blesses him.

And then, when Esau does arrive, and finds out what happened, he wants a blessing too, and Isaac says, "Sorry, there is only one...that I can bless you, and you'll be away from the nice places of the earth, and you get to be out there in the sand and the rocks, and enjoy it; every once in a while, you may get the upper hand over your brother, but he is going to end up being number one all the time. It is just the way that it is." And so, Esau says, "Jacob! I'm going to kill you! Just as soon as dad is dead, you are done!"

Jacob flees away. And Isaac and Rebekah agree. Even though Esau's wives are driving us to distraction, get out of here, and leave. So, Jacob leaves.

In Genesis 28, Jacob is fleeing for his life, he is running north to his family back in Haran, and he is going to go stay with them until Esau's wrath cools down. When Jacob stops to sleep in Luz, now known as Bethel. God appears to him in a dream, and promises to bless him—this up-to-now scumbag. Why God picked Jacob, we do not know. The apostle Paul later points out that God picked Jacob before they were even born. God follows through on His choice, and he calls Jacob at this point. He says, "I am going to make of you a great nation,"—the same promise He had given Isaac, and Abraham before him.

And so, Jacob says, "This sounds pretty good. I'm going to have all the fat places of the earth; we're going to be nations, and kings will come from me; this sounds like a pretty good idea. So, I will join this covenant with You. If you do what you say, God, I'll give you ten percent. I will tithe. This sounds like a great bargain."

Jacob accepts the calling. He signs the contract. In Genesis 29, the first thing he sees in Haran is Rachel! Love is now in the air! And, that is about all that he thinks about for the next fourteen years. Unfortunately, he has to also meet her father, Laban.

Now, Laban is a piece of work. Jacob did not notice, at first, just what kind of a man Laban was. But, at that moment, Jacob had met his match in cunning and trickery. If Jacob was good at getting what he wanted, Laban would steal everything that you had. He was cut from the same cloth, and worse. You could call Laban Jacob's mirror image.

Jacob, looking at Laban, saw himself for what he was. And, he was revolted. He was disgusted, when he really saw what Laban was. This began to happen when Jacob was to marry Rachel. But, you know the story. When he agrees to work for Rachel, after the seven years were finished, there was the marriage ceremony, and then they retire to the tent where they cannot see anything; he consummates the marriage and wakes up the next morning with Leah by his side, and not Rachel.

And so, Jacob charges out of the tent, goes to Laban:

**Genesis 29:25** So it came to pass in the morning, that behold, it was Leah. And he said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served you? Why then have you deceived me?"

This is where Jacob begins to see Laban for what he is.

**Genesis 29:26-28** And Laban said [sounding very reasonable], "It must not be done so in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. Fulfill her week, and we will give you this one also for the service which you will serve with me still another seven years." Then Jacob did so and fulfilled her week. So he gave him his daughter Rachel as wife also.

**Genesis 29:30** Then Jacob also went in to Rachel, and he also loved Rachel more than Leah. And he served with Laban still another seven years.

Remember, we saw that Jacob was called, and that he made a conscious choice to follow God, to be a part of this covenant—this agreement. Now, he did not know all that was in it, but at least he made the conscious choice that he would fulfill the contract that God made with him. And we also saw that Jacob began to recognize himself for what he was in Laban. He saw his match. He also knew that it was so awful and disgusting that he determined he did not want to be that way, to be known as one who would sell his daughters as wages to some guy who would work for him, who would have no concern



for his own. It did not matter, all he wanted was what he could get.

Jacob essentially said, “Even though I’ve done things like this in the past to my brother, to my mother, to my father, I’m not going to do that and be that way anymore.” He was beginning to see the light, and recognize himself in the sinful acts of his uncle, Laban. And what did he do? When he sees that in himself, he recognizes the need to change. And that is why I read this little passage in chapter 29. Did you notice that when Laban explained what he had done, Jacob simply complied? He does not argue. He does not even try to strike a bargain. This is an entirely different Jacob suddenly.

The old Jacob would have done something—anything he could—to get what he wanted without paying for it. But the new Jacob worked, served, and did what Laban asked.

Do you see the process of overcoming, here? He was making choices to change his behavior from the trickery and cunning that he had done before, to this simple compliance and labor, and service—godly things. He submitted to Laban’s request for Rachel. He did it.

In this section, we can see fruit of Jacob’s repentance. Repenting is not only saying that you are going to do differently, repenting is doing something differently—the right way—God’s way.

And we see this in Jacob. He is starting to change, and turn his life around for the good. This is where choice comes into the picture. Jacob chose to comply. Jacob chose to work. He chose to live peaceably with Laban. He chose not to knife him in the back. He did not try to get the people in town on his side, and force Laban by lawsuit to give him what he had contracted for at the beginning. He does none of this. He just simply chooses to make the best of the situation by doing what Laban asked him to do.

He was growing in righteousness by having made these choices. He was showing that the calling had taken root, and was working in him.

You may be thinking about what happens next. In chapter 30, we have the incident of Jacob’s deal with Laban to get his wages. The deal was—here he is, he has been all these years with Laban already, and done all the work for Laban. Laban was sitting back in his tent with his feet up, and only being the patriarch and not really running anything. And Jacob was the one who was running everything. He had all his flocks, and doing all the heavy work, making Laban a lot of money. He was becoming fabulously rich on the efforts of Jacob.

And so, Jacob finally says, “Look. I would like my wages. What are we going to do? How are we going to work this out?” They come up with an agreement that Jacob would take all the speckled, striped, and spotted sheep and goats in the flock as his wages. And Laban would have all the rest, whatever their color. And Laban agrees to it.

And Jacob goes on a mission—this is get-er-done Jacob. He goes out on a selective breeding campaign like you have never seen. And within a little while, Jacob’s flocks were full of spotted and speckled animals, making him very rich.

**Genesis 30:43** Thus the man [Jacob] became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks, female and male servants, and camels and donkeys.

Jacob became a wealthy man through the selective breeding he had done. I will not go into of the details because I do not understand it all myself. But basically what Jacob did was use simple genetics to breed for speckles and spots. And it worked. And he became really rich.

This may seem to be a reversion to Jacob’s trickery, but it is a lot more complex than this, because Jacob was converted. You may have never thought of it in this way, but Jacob really does nothing wrong. For one thing, Laban had put him in charge of the flocks and herds already. It was his job. Secondly, Laban and Jacob had agreed to this wages. The deal was agreed to. Then, Jacob went out and worked, and worked, and worked to increase his flocks for his wages for which he was entitled by contract and his labor that he had put in all those many years of service.

What this shows is that Jacob does nothing wrong. He works within the agreement. And he uses correct principles of animal husbandry to become successful.

The reason I know that he did all this is because God blessed him until he was extremely wealthy. This step in the process of overcoming I will call the *application of right principles*. He worked within the system. And, he used all the leeway that God gave him within that system to do what was right, and to grow and prosper.

Do you know what Jesus Christ said in Luke 16:8? He said that the sons of the world are shrewder than the sons of light—except for Jacob. He was very shrewd. He was still taking advantage of the contract, but he was working entirely within its limits. And that is what God wants us to do. He wants us to work within the limits of the freedoms that He gives us to do right. We can be very shrewd about these things. God does not hold us back.

Jacob applied right principles in order to prosper, and grow, and bear fruit. I am not saying that we need to be shady, and I do not think that Jacob was trying to be shady. He was doing this all under heaven. Everybody could see what Jacob was doing. He was applying right principles in order to bear fruit.

In Genesis 31 is the passage where Jacob finally has had enough, and Laban will not let him go, but God has told Jacob that he needs to go. And so, finally, Jacob decides to just pick up and go. But Laban comes chasing after him, and finally catches him, because Rachel had stolen his household gods. And he went after Jacob to get them back. He searches high and low, but cannot find them because Rachel is sitting on them, and she makes an excuse to him that it is her time of the month. And Laban is in a huff—and Jacob is angry too.

**Genesis 31:36-37a** Then Jacob was angry and rebuked Laban, and Jacob answered and said to Laban: "What is my trespass? What is my sin, that you have so hotly pursued me? Although you have searched all my things, what part of your household things have you found? . . .

Jacob did not know what Rachel had done. She did this on her own.

**Genesis 31:37b-42** . . . Set it here before my brethren and your brethren, that they may judge between us both! These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried their young, and I have not eaten the rams of your flock. That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it. You required it from my hand, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes. Thus I have been in your house twenty years; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night."

This is a vastly different Jacob than the lying, cheating one who left Isaac twenty years before. He had overcome great bad parts of his human nature, at least in this one area, by working day after day to become righteous, to do the right thing, to earn his daily bread, to earn their respect—of course, Laban did not think that he was worth anything

at all. But, God knew. And God had blessed him, and rebuked Laban.

Now, he manifests a new godly trait when he finds out that Esau is coming to meet him. And what did Jacob do? He was very humble.

**Genesis 32:9-12** Then Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LOORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you': I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children. For You said, 'I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"

He comes in humility, beseeching God to protect him. He is not worthy anymore for what God had done. He thought himself a big shot when he left, but now he is humble. And, if we would go on, we would see how he and Esau finally met. We find that Jacob bowed to the ground seven times to his brother Esau—the man he thought of so lightly that he tricked him out of both his birthright and blessing. But after twenty years, and all the things that he experienced, and all the overcoming that he had done, now he bows to Esau seven times as his superior.

What a changed man Jacob had become. And then later in the same chapter,

**Genesis 32:22-28** And he 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 He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his 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 said to him, "What is your name?" 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."

Overcoming Is A Choice by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

Finally Jacob demonstrates one more character trait that we need in the process of overcoming—endurance, persistence, stick-to-itiveness, enduring to the end. He never gave up. With his hip out of joint, and the pain coursing through his body, he still clenched with God until He would bless him. He struggled even with God to succeed, to prevail, to conquer, and overcome. And God marked the fact that he had left his old nature behind by giving him a more appropriate name—Israel—Prince with God, Prevailer with God.

Prevail is a synonym for overcome. Jacob proved himself over all this time to be an overcomer. And he did it by the choices that he made day-by-day to live God's way, to come under the covenant he had made with Him. And so must we.

The Bible's last mention of overcoming is found in Revelation 21:7, which says,

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

We have been called to overcome. And overcoming happens because we choose to do right in everyday choices of life, until they become righteous character—God's character.