

The Formula For Overcoming

by David F. Maas

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How many of us, over the course of our spiritual lives, have encountered a persistent fault, habit or character flaw that has left us with a helpless sense of frustration? Maybe a better question is, "How many have NOT had such an encounter?"

Overcoming constitutes a year-round, lifelong obligation—clearly the most burdensome and irksome chore we will ever have. When we weigh this task against the enormity of sin and the downward pulls of our human nature, it seems *next to impossible!*

In the spring of the year when we go through a rather intense period of self-examination, we find pockets of hidden—and sometimes not-so-hidden—leavening that may leave us with a sense of futility, hopelessness or discouragement. Yet, overcoming remains a task that our Elder Brother Jesus Christ has laid upon us (Matthew 5:48), and He has every confidence that, together, we can bring this job through to completion (Philippians 1:6).

This article will reveal an insightful but little understood concept that lays bare why overcoming often seems nearly impossible. It will then provide a powerful formula that, when properly applied, will make overcoming exciting, adventurous and challenging.

A Paralyzing Affliction

In his book, *People in Quandaries*, General Semanticist Wendell Johnson proposes a theory to explain why individuals become so overwhelmed at programs of self-improvement and overcoming. He refers to an affliction that enslaves and paralyzes 90% of humanity. Johnson termed this affliction the IFD disease. IFD stands for Idealism, Frustration, Despair, a predictable sequence that moves the hapless victim down a destructive spiral.

We could explain the acronym as:

I

People set their goals or **ideals** impossibly high or beyond reach.

F

They feel **frustrated** or a sense of **futility** in falling short of their expectations.

D

They feel **demoralized** and **defeated**, and do not desire to continue.

This article is not intended to attack the striving after high ideals. God wants us to have high ideals and standards, but He does not want us to become frustrated in the process of attaining them. The highest ideal we can imagine is becoming a member of God's Family!

However, the process of undergoing the transformation from a carnal, physical body to a godly, dazzling spirit cannot be contemplated except as an end-product of thousands and thousands of

subprocesses. We will succeed in achieving a workable and valuable goal when we spell out the ways and means of reaching it in measurable and attainable steps. In other words, we cannot possibly grasp the big picture unless we see a series of small pictures.

In the context of Christian living:

I

refers to vague and hazily defined goals—ones that we do not measure in bite-sized chunks or increments.

F

refers to the frustration and anxiety we feel because we have not made intermediate, incremental objectives clear in our own minds.

D

refers to the despair we feel in falling short of attaining these spiritual goals of perfect godly character.

Fine as Incense

We often fail to move toward spiritual perfection because we do not ask for it, or when we do ask, we couch it in vague generalities. God commands us to break our requests down finely as incense (Psalm 141:2). In many of our generic, all-purpose petitions—such as, "Please God, help me to overcome," or "Please God, help me to change"—we fail to spell out to God exactly what we want Him to help us to do. It would be better if we broke down our goals into visualized objectives, as much for our own peace of mind as for God's assistance.

Of course, God knows what we need before we ask (Matthew 6:32), but we are the ones who need to know what to ask for. If we were more specific about the immediate steps we need to take, we would not have so much anxiety and despondency about the outcome.

When our goals for overcoming are not spelled out in incremental, intermediate steps, we can expect the inevitable outcome to be demoralization and worry. Motivational expert Paul Meyer describes anxiety about the future as a penalty paid in advance for failure or wrongdoing we have not yet committed. Conversely, he defines success as the day-by-day realization of a predetermined, worthwhile goal.

Consequently, we should consider overcoming a fault or a character flaw as a "now" activity, not as a future possibility. Jesus advises His disciples to put high intensity into overcoming and living in the present—in the here and now. He also cautions us in Matthew 6:34, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

We have the most success with overcoming when we break it down into daily, manageable increments rather than trying to envision it as a horrendous, lifetime project. In Luke 9:23, Jesus recommends that we consider overcoming a daily task, suggesting, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross *daily*, and follow Me."

Similarly, the apostle Paul expresses an awareness that we ought to consider overcoming a daily, incremental process: "I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die

daily " (I Corinthians 15:31). He again reinforces this day-by-day principle in II Corinthians 4:16: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed *day by day* ."

British philosopher Sir William Osler sums up the concept very succinctly when he said, "Live in 'day tight' compartments." This does not mean that we live for today only. It means we should carve a worthy lifetime goal, like becoming a member of God's Family, into bite-sized chunks.

Meaningful Days

At the beginning of each day, we would do well to set specific priorities, and at the end of each day, measure our success. For instance, we could set bite-sized spiritual goals, such as refraining to think or say coarse things when a rude, inconsiderate motorist cuts us off or drives 20 mph in a 70-mph zone. These concrete situations will determine if the self-control, patience and peace of Galatians 5: 22-23 have really matured in our character.

Perhaps we have a bad habit of gossiping about a brother or sister in Christ. We can set an incremental goal of changing the subject when gossip rears its ugly head. In conquering an enslaving habit like alcoholism, people find it more productive to look at sobriety as a day-by-day, step-by-step process than as a grim lifetime of abstinence. Explorer John Goddard has said, "Any task in life can be made easier when it is broken down into increments."

Achieving spiritual goals resembles the physical task of pulling weeds. I considered clearing our 50-acre bean field of cockleburs a most irksome task, but my brother and I managed to keep up the intensity by concentrating on the weeds immediately in front of us. If we looked back, we would become self-satisfied and rest on our laurels. If we looked at the weediness of the entire field, we would become discouraged and tempted to quit.

Like many people, I am afraid of heights. When I had to, however, I was able to climb a windmill by concentrating on one step at a time, directing all my energies into climbing that one step. Both literally and metaphorically, all of us should be able to put one foot in front of the other.

Several years ago on *The Tonight Show*, Johnny Carson had a guest who had set himself a goal of eating an entire car. He had done this over a period of years by breaking, cutting or grinding all the components into bite-sized segments—even the battery, crankshaft and muffler! One would think that becoming a member of God's Family every bit as worthy a goal as eating a car!

Whatever the goal, the principle of the bite-sized increments remains the same. For example, back in 1988, my wife Julie embarked on the task of getting a book manuscript ready for publication. We broke the task down into hundreds of small subprocesses, celebrating after each minor accomplishment. (We celebrated a lot!) The euphoria of accomplishing one mini-task supplied the energy to begin the next one. Similarly, failing to complete an insignificant mini-task, like writing a letter or making a phone call, can grow into a millstone as one puts it off.

Rabbi Meir Kahane once suggested that the greatest curse to fall upon a human being happens when he looks over his entire life and finds it to be meaningless. An empty life consists of the cumulative total of numerous empty days. If we can render each day of life meaningful, a lifetime of meaningful days will accrue to us, and we will have had a meaningful life.

The only real overcoming and character-building are now—in the present—today. To those who do not live in the present, there are only empty yesterdays and fearful tomorrows. We need to apply this better formula to our Christian lives:

O=M/G

Overcoming (O) consists of keeping our **motivation** (M) high while pursuing realistic, attainable, bite-sized **goals** (G).