

Overcomers

Eight times in the book of Revelation, the apostle John refers to *overcomers* and the special rewards promised to them. What does it mean to overcome, and who are these overcomers?

The Greek verb “to overcome” (*nikao*) was used in ancient times to refer to the victors in the Greek Olympic games. The noun “overcomer” (*nike*) was used to refer to Nike, the Greek goddess of victory. That tells us something about this word. It is used of those who are victorious amidst a contest of some nature.

In modern church history, those of an Arminian theological bent have concluded that overcomers are those who haven't lost their salvation. Calvinist-leaning theologians, who hold to the doctrine of perseverance of the saints, interpret the overcomers as true Christians, as evidenced by their persevering in sanctification. In essence, both of these theological systems classify all saved people as overcomers. But is this what the Bible teaches? Are all believers overcomers?

A third position that I believe is more consistent with Scripture is that only faithful Christians – as deemed worthy by Jesus at the Judgment Seat – will be declared overcomers and, therefore, inheritors of the promised rewards.

Perhaps the single greatest argument used to refute this third position is something John says in [1 John 5:4-5](#):

For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?

Those of the first two theological persuasions mentioned above assert, based on this passage, that all born again believers are overcomers. Their syllogism goes something like this:

1. Whatever is born of God overcomes the world
2. The one who overcomes the world is the one who believes Jesus is the Son of God
3. All who believe in Jesus must overcome the world

They then assume that all children of God are entitled to the rewards mentioned in the book of Revelation ([Rev. 2:7,11,17,26](#); [3:5,12,21](#); [21:7](#)). However, this assumption is not valid if the syllogism is inaccurate.

Indeed, there is something missing that is critically important to the syllogism – “the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.” Thus, the syllogism needs to be rewritten as follows:

1. Whatever is born of God overcomes the world
2. The victory that overcomes the world is our faith
3. Those who overcome the world are those, born of God, who are exercising faith

Hiebert says, "The new birth gives the believer the potential of victory, but the realization of actual victory depends on our active exercise of faith."^[1] Every born-again believer has the provision to be an overcomer, but he must choose to appropriate the provision in order to be victorious. "Overcomer" is not a status automatically conferred upon all children of God. John is certainly not suggesting that all believers are overcomers and, therefore, worthy of receiving the rewards promised in Revelation. On the contrary, he is saying that all believers have equal opportunity to be victorious because of the new birth.

There are two keys to properly interpreting the first epistle of John. First, John is writing to born-again believers, which is evident by his repeated use of the word "brethren." He is not, as some suggest, writing to *professing* believers, to help them evaluate whether they are truly in the faith. Second, John's purpose in writing the book is not to give evidences of salvation, but rather, evidences of fellowship.

John's purpose statement is given at the beginning of the epistle: "these things write we unto you that your joy may be full." John is concerned that his readers ("my little children," 2:1) learn to live the abundant life, the victorious life. It is a life of fellowship with God (1:3,6,7); walking in the light, as opposed to darkness (1:5-8); refraining from sinning, i.e., obeying God's commandments (2:1,4-6: 3:1-10); loving the brethren (2:9-11; 3:14-18; 4:7-11); not loving the world (2:15-17); abiding in Christ (2:28; 3:6); experiencing prayers being answered (3:22;5:14-15); discerning the spirits (4:1-6); love for the Lord (4:15-5:3); experiencing the joys of eternal life now (5:11-13), etc.

If these things are evidences of salvation, as some teach, then how much of these things in the life makes one saved? Does the absence of one or more of these things make one unsaved? Does not a hermeneutic of this nature cause one to forever doubt his salvation, wondering if he has measured up? Furthermore, does not this theological system essentially make judges of man (by "suggesting" that so-and-so must not be saved because his life doesn't give evidence of it)? Does this not lead to Lordship-salvation? Indeed, a proper interpretation of the first epistle of John is critical to the doctrines of justification and sanctification!

The lives of many Christians are characterized by producing works of the flesh rather than the fruit of the Spirit. Are they overcomers? Apparently not in God's eyes, for they are not accessing God's grace by faith ([Rom. 5:2](#)). The rewards promised in the book of Revelation for overcomers will not accrue to their benefit. Does that describe you, or are you overcoming by depending on the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within you?

[1] Hiebert, D. Edmond, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1991), 229.