

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.

Make Your Calling and Election Sure

Brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things ye shall never fall. [2 Peter 1:10](#)

What does it mean to *make your calling and election sure*? Some would say, “make sure you don’t lose your salvation!” Others, at the opposite end of the theological spectrum, might say, “make sure you really have salvation!” Yet neither of these interpretations is consistent with the context of 2 Peter, chapter one, or with the overall theme of the epistle.

If Peter is suggesting a believer can lose his salvation, then he is implying the means by which one stays saved is by diligently adding to his faith (v.5ff). Is that not works-salvation and totally contrary to the whole teaching of Scripture?

On the other hand, if Peter is suggesting the way a professing believer knows (in his conscience) he is truly saved is by diligently adding to his faith, then how does the professing believer measure whether he has added enough to prove to himself that he is saved? What if he has not added all of the things in the list? What if he backslides and reverts back to the beginning of the list? What if he stops adding for awhile? What if the believer thinks he has added sufficiently but others do not think he has? Does not man become the measure? Does not this interpretation fuel the fires of doubt regarding one’s salvation? The very thing (adding to faith) that purportedly makes one’s calling and election sure, actually makes it very unsure.

In order to properly interpret this passage, several observations must be made:

1. Peter assumes his readers are believers, not merely *professing* believers.

In verse 10 he addresses the audience as *brethren*. In verse 9 he claims that those who have not added to their faith have forgotten they had been purged from their old sins. He doesn’t say they were never saved; rather, he describes them as essentially forgetting they had been cleansed (regenerated). Furthermore, in verse one Peter addresses those who *have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ*. There is no doubt, contextually, that Peter is addressing believers, not merely *professing* believers.

2. Peter is discussing sanctification, not justification.

According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: (v.3)

Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. (v.4)

Peter goes on in verse 3 to describe the positional sanctification that all believers possess in Christ. At salvation everything necessary for living a godly life is bestowed upon the child of God. There is no warning suggesting that positional sanctification can be revoked or that it may have never been received. In verse 4 Peter instructs as to the means by which believers can appropriate their positional sanctification in a practical manner: by claiming the promises. The overall thrust of this sanctification passage is as follows:

- a. The Spirit has bestowed on us the enablement for living an abundant, victorious Christian life (v.3)
- b. By claiming the promises of God we become participants in the nature of Jesus, which is always victorious over sin (v.4)
- c. We access the promises by faith, which leads to further steps of obedience (v. 5-7)

And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. (v.5-7)

Peter never suggests these believers are in some sort of experimental mode, the outcome of which will determine whether they are truly saved or not. Nor does he give any indication these believers need to demonstrate their salvation to others or to themselves in order to prove they are genuinely regenerated. He assumes they are already saved and speaks as if they are fully cognizant of and confident in this truth. Accordingly, he urges them to access the promises by faith and thereby take additional steps of obedience by adding to their faith. If they fail to do so, they are not casting doubt on their justification; rather, they are refusing to be sanctified.

But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. (v.9)

How foolish and shortsighted to ignore our God-given provision for becoming

sanctified! The apostle Paul describes this spiritual condition as “carnal.” It will result in being saved at the Judgment Seat of Christ, yet so as by fire ([1 Cor. 3:15](#)).

3. Peter says those who make their calling and election sure will never fall, not prove or guarantee their salvation

For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (v.8)

How does one make his calling and election sure? By doing “these things,” that is, by diligently adding virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love to his faith. It’s a matter of sanctification, not justification.

When this kind of Christ-like obedience characterizes a child of God, he is neither barren (idle) nor unfruitful. In other words, he is a productive, fruit-bearing Christian. Such fruitfulness will be rewarded by Jesus at the Judgment Seat.

Furthermore, those who diligently add to their faith will *never fall* (v.10). The word translated *fall* is never used in the New Testament to refer to eternal condemnation. Rather, it refers to stumbling or failure. Thus, Peter is not saying that a professing believer will – by adding to his faith – be assured that he is not eternally condemned.

His point is that believers who are adding to their faith will not get tripped up or fail spiritually. In other words, to the extent the saint of God is walking in the Spirit, living the Christ-life ([Rom. 8:4](#); [Gal. 2:20](#); [5:16](#)), he will not stumble. A similar idea is found in [1 John 2:10](#), *He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him.* Abiding (remaining) in the light (obedience) keeps one from stumbling into sinful behavior.

Thus, making one’s calling and election sure has nothing to do with guaranteeing one’s justification. Nor is it about proving to one’s self (and perhaps to others) “I am truly saved,” but rather it is making sure one accesses the provision that has already been given at the point of regeneration.

4. Peter’s theme is perseverance that results in reward, not perseverance unto eternal life.

For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. (v.10)

“Faithful living in difficult times” is the theme of 2 Peter. [\[i\]](#) The apostle warns of false teachers who promise “liberty,” (2:29) and thereby promote

licentiousness. He also reminds his readers that earth will one day be destroyed, *and the works that are therein shall be burned up (3:10)*. Peter uses these adverse circumstances as motivations to live righteously.

Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness ...? (3:11)

Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless. (3:14)

Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. (3:17-18)

Notice Peter warns again in the very end of the epistle to not *fall from ... steadfastness*. This is the same point made in chapter one. He is urging these believers not to stumble in their faithful Christian walk, to continue adding to their faith.

Perseverance is most definitely taught in chapter one and throughout the entire epistle. However, it is not perseverance that assures the professing believer he is truly saved, as has been demonstrated in the previous point, but perseverance that assures the actual believer of abundant reward.

In the context of 2 Peter 1, it becomes obvious that Peter's reference to *calling and election* is not merely to the fact of God's divine invitation and selection of us in salvation – the initial event – but rather to His ongoing purpose for saving us. In other words, we are called, but for what purpose? We are elected, but for what intent? In the context of this book we are elected unto obedient, holy living. That is why we are to add to our faith. Then we are called to persevere in that way of living, despite suffering, hardship or adverse circumstances of any type, knowing that one day we will give account to Jesus for how we fared while on earth.

Those who fare well will be given abundant entrance into his everlasting kingdom (which begins with the millennial kingdom). They will be inheritors of the kingdom who will rule and reign with Him for a thousand years. Those believers who live in carnality while on earth are blind and cannot see afar off (i.e., do not have eternal vision) and live as if they have forgotten they were ever saved. The implication of this passage – which is also clearly declared elsewhere in the New Testament – is that this latter group will not *inherit* the millennium or the new heaven/earth to follow. Though they will presumably dwell in the millennial earth, and will certainly live eternally in heaven, they will not receive the greater glory, they will not rule and reign with Jesus, and they will consciously regret it throughout the thousand years. They will *suffer loss*.

A biblical example of abundant entrance is Stephen. The Scriptures

characterize him as *full of faith and power* ([Acts 6:8](#)). He was a godly man who obviously added to his faith and walked with Jesus. As he was being martyred, Jesus gave him abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom – even in advance of the Judgment Seat. Stephen was granted *the face of an angel* (the glow of Christ on his face – see [Acts 6:15](#)); a glimpse of Jesus *standing on the right hand of God* (7:56); and a Christlike spirit toward his tormentors (*Lord, lay not this sin to their charge* – 7:60). Abundant entrance indeed.

In light of the coming Judgment Seat of Christ, may we all be diligent to add to our faith and thereby make our calling and election sure.

[\[i\]](#) Walvoord, John F. and Roy B. Zuck, editors. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Victor Books, 1983), 859.