

Overcoming the World

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—John 16:33***

AS JESUS DREW NEAR TO the close of his ministry in the flesh, he was more than ever concerned for the welfare of his disciples. He knew that without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit they would

not be able to understand fully the meaning of the seemingly tragic events which were fast closing in around him. Yet he endeavored to prepare their minds and hearts as fully as possible, lest they be completely stumbled and thus not be ready to enter into the privileges of the Gospel Age which were to open beginning at Pentecost. Thus he ministered to them directly and prayed for them to this end.

The disciples had already learned that being a follower of the lowly Nazarene did not bring them the goodwill and approval of the world, particularly the religious world of that day. While there were times when the multitudes flocked around their beloved Master, too often the motive turned out to be the material benefit which they hoped to receive

from the miracles he performed, to “eat of the loaves” and to be “filled.” (John 6:26) Few were interested to the point of being willing to make sacrifices in order to be disciples of Jesus, and often there was outright opposition manifested toward him.

Before Jesus was crucified his disciples probably thought that in some way he would overcome this opposition and become the accepted leader and King of Israel, and ultimately of the whole world. Had not the prophet written concerning him, “Of the increase of his government and peace,” there would be no end? (Isa. 9:7) As yet they did not know that first it was necessary that he suffer and die for the world before the prophecies concerning his kingdom glory would be fulfilled. (Luke 24:26) It was their hope to share in the Master’s glory, which they believed was near.

Jesus did not withhold from his disciples the fact of his imminent death, but somehow they felt that what he had said in this regard must have another meaning. “My flesh ... I will give for the life of the world,” he had said. (John 6:51) He told them also that he must go to Jerusalem where he would suffer many things, and finally be killed. When hearing this, Peter said, “Be it far from thee, Lord,” indicating that he thought Jesus was wrong in estimating the strength of his enemies, or that he could be dissuaded from recklessly exposing himself to danger.—Matt. 16:21,22

Jesus, however, meant exactly what he said concerning his rapidly approaching death, even though the disciples could not bring themselves to believe that it would actually occur. Jesus knew that they were still viewing their privileges of discipleship

too largely from the standpoint of the material advantages of glory they hoped to attain from being associated with him. Indeed, they loved him, and they loved the Messianic cause of which they were convinced he was the divinely appointed leader, but they did not yet understand, as clearly as they would know later, that there was to be suffering and death associated with that cause, as well as glory and honor. The prophets had foretold the “sufferings of Christ” as well as the “glory that should follow,” but thus far they knew only of the promised glory, and in that glory they hoped to share.—I Pet. 1:10,11; Isa. 53:1-12

Jesus knew this, so in the closing days of his ministry he endeavored to prepare them for what he foresaw would yet be their experience. “If the world hate you,” he said, “ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: ... but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” “These things have I spoken unto you,” the Master continued, “that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.”—John 15:18-20; 16:1,2

There would seem to be no way of misunderstanding the meaning of statements such as these, for they speak of impending calamity. In addition to telling his disciples that death might be their reward for following him, he also forewarned, “The hour ... is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every

man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me.” (John 16:32) Such statements as these, coming from a reliable source, would certainly be liable to engender fear and a fretful foreboding of future disaster. However, Jesus further explained, “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”—vs. 33

Such words as the foregoing seem a strange way of cheering people and of quieting their hearts. It is well to note, though, that it was not so much the warning of coming trouble that was calculated to give the disciples peace and good cheer, but rather the fact that when it came, they would understand its meaning and realize that they were having the privilege of suffering with him. Jesus wanted them to know also that he overcame the world, and that they too would be given strength to overcome the world if they continued to be his disciples. With this assurance of victory, they could have “good cheer” despite the opposition of the world. Knowledge that they were suffering with their Master, while not lessening the pain, would give them courage to continue on.

THE CHRISTIAN WARFARE

In the example set by Jesus’ own life and ministry, and through his teachings as well as the teachings of his apostles, it is clear that the Christian life is one of struggle against opposition. It is a warfare in which we are engaged in combat against formidable enemies, which most certainly would overpower us unless we were given divine strength to overcome

them. Satan, the devil, is the chief of our enemies, and his allies are the world and our own fallen flesh. (I Pet. 5:8) As New Creatures in Christ Jesus we find ourselves at enmity with all three of these, and this struggle will continue as long as we are in the flesh.

Descriptive of our efforts to subdue the flesh are such scriptural terms as “mortify” and “crucify.” (Col. 3:5; Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20; 5:24; 6:14) Speaking of himself, the Apostle Paul wrote, “I discipline my body and keep it under control.” (I Cor. 9:27, *English Standard Version*) On the other hand, the term “overcome” is used in the New Testament to describe the Christian’s victory over Satan, and over the evil which is the foundation of the world of which he is the prince. “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good,” writes Paul. (Rom. 12:21) John speaks of overcoming “the wicked one.” (I John 2:13,14) He also writes that he who “is born [begotten] of God overcometh the world.”—I John 5:4

The Apostle John was greatly impressed with what the Master said about overcoming the world, for not only did he make a record of it in his Gospel, which Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not, but he enlarges upon this theme in his epistles. John also seemed to appreciate greatly the thought of divine love as it was manifested in the sending of Jesus to be man’s Redeemer. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,” he records. (John 3:16) With reference to our privilege of joint-heirship with Jesus he writes, “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.”—I John 3:1-3

It will be helpful in considering the matter of overcoming the world, to remember that there have been two great principles operating in the earth since man's original sin. These are love and selfishness—or good and evil. It was probably the Apostle John's clear vision of divine love, and what it means to God's creatures, that helped him to discern the importance of the Master's statement concerning the matter of overcoming the world. To John, it meant that Jesus had been victorious over the evil, selfish spirit of the world.

The Creator, our Heavenly Father, is the author of love, and throughout the ages has been its sponsor. Satan is the sponsor of selfishness. These two principles have been at war with each other since the fall of man. True Christians, those whom God has called to serve him and who have been faithful to the terms of their calling, have been motivated solely by love. They have been "begotten of God,"—that is, by his Spirit. (I Pet. 1:3; I John 5:18) The remainder of mankind has, to a greater or lesser extent, gone through life with the principle of selfishness largely controlling them. Most assuredly, not all have been willfully wicked, unjust or unkind. Man was created in the image of God, and traces of this image still remain and manifest themselves in deeds of kindness on the part of many.

However much these are to be commended, it is not just kind deeds, nor acts of charity, which constitute overcoming the world and its spirit, as Jesus set us the example. Rather, it is a matter of a changed viewpoint on the objective of life, from the principle of living for self to the principle of living for God by devoting our lives to his service. Self-preservation,

it has been said, is nature's great law. This is undoubtedly true with respect to all the lower orders of God's creatures here on the earth, and properly so. It is only because of sin and the misrule of Satan, however, that it has been adopted by human beings as the dominating motive of life.

Self-interest has become so much a way of life in the world that it is considered normal and commendable. It is a principle which, to a large extent, rules the "present evil world," over which Satan is the "prince." (Gal. 1:4; John 12:31) This was also true during past ages, throughout the many centuries since man's fall from perfection. Some, instead of drifting with the waves of selfishness which have swept the majority of mankind along, have gone against the tide. They have devoted their lives unselfishly to causes which they hope might somehow better man's current state, or at least alleviate the sufferings of those who are unable to help themselves. These will have their reward in God's due time.

The only "cause" which actually will do away with selfishness and establish love throughout the whole earth as the motive of life is God's plan of redemption through Christ. The only ones, therefore, who can truly overcome the world at the present time, in the scriptural sense, are those who follow faithfully in his footsteps of sacrifice. Before Jesus' First Advent there were some who caught the spirit of the Messianic cause and gladly devoted their lives to it. Paul lists a number of these in Hebrews chapter 11. Moses was one of them. "By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer

affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward.”—Heb. 11:24-26

John wrote that the victory which overcomes the world is faith. (I John 5:4) On this basis, Moses was an overcomer. As the world views matters, it would have been much to Moses’ advantage to remain in Egypt and accept legal membership in Pharaoh’s family. From the standpoint of self-interest, he had everything to lose and nothing to gain by leaving and espousing the cause of his people. However, as the apostle explains, “By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible.” (Heb. 11:27) Moses had faith in the promises of God and was confident that a course of life consistent with those promises would be to his best eternal interests, even though it meant the loss of nearly all earthly advantage.

JESUS, THE GREAT EXAMPLE

In Jesus we have our greatest and most comprehensive pattern of love as a way of life. He not only gave us an example, but enjoined love upon his followers, saying, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you.” (John 13:34) However, this viewpoint was neither understood nor appreciated by the people of Jesus’ day, and not until Pentecost did his own disciples grasp its real import. When the rich young ruler was told to sell all he had and give to the poor, he went away sorrowful. In following the law of

self-preservation he had accumulated those goods as a protection against the future, and he was not prepared to abandon the idea that someday he would need his wealth.—Matt. 19:16-22; Luke 18:18-23

Even the disciples were perplexed at this advice to the rich young man, which seemed to reflect so reckless an abandoning of all self-interest. Commenting on the incident, Jesus explained to his disciples that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. Then they asked, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus did not answer this question directly, observing merely, “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.” Peter, wishing to understand a philosophy so different from anything to which they were accustomed, asked, “Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?”—Matt. 19:23-27

The import of Peter’s question is obvious. “We have forsaken all,” he said. In other words, he was reminding the Master that as his disciples they had complied with the conditions of discipleship he sought to impose upon the rich young ruler. Indeed, their “all” was probably not as much as the young man’s “all,” but the principle was the same. Having made this sacrifice, they naturally wanted to know what they could expect to get in return. This was the point of Peter’s question. It reveals that as yet he had not caught the true spirit of discipleship. To him it was still more or less of a business proposition, one which he hoped would net him greater returns, at least in honor and prestige, than his fishing business. Instead of being a humble fisherman, he had hopes of a prominent position in

Messiah's kingdom to be a ruler, prince, and great among men.

When Jesus announced to his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem and that he expected to be arrested there and put to death, Peter admonished, "Be it far from thee, Lord," or, as *Young's Literal Translation* reads, "Be kind to thyself." (Matt. 16:22) Jesus' reply to this well-meant advice was to the point: "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men." (vs. 23) Peter was attempting to persuade the Master that he should permit self-interest to influence him and not go to Jerusalem, where he knew his enemies had set a trap for his arrest. In doing this, Peter was unwittingly espousing the cause of Satan, who always encourages men to consider self first.

People of the world, over which Satan is the prince, naturally think of self first most of the time. It has become man's way of life since the days of Eden, but it is not God's way. Jesus was introducing a new pathway—that of self-less love. In God's world, "wherein dwelleth righteousness," it is the only way which will be permitted to continue. (II Pet. 3:13) However, now it is the path merely of Jesus' disciples, introduced by him during his earthly ministry.

Jesus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." (Matt. 16:24,25) Peter had advised Jesus to save his life, but Jesus here explained to Peter that those who endeavor to save their lives will lose them, whereas those who lose their lives in sacrifice will

save them. It is doubtful if the disciples understood the depth of this statement at that time, but it was simply one method by which Jesus explained the difference between the way of self-interest and the way of love—love that is manifested by a self-sacrificing interest on behalf of others.

Jesus was even then “losing his life” sacrificially for others—indeed, for the whole world of mankind. Later, to the women at his empty tomb, the instruction was given to go and tell the disciples that he had been raised from the dead, and in that commission special mention was made of Peter: “Go ... tell his disciples and Peter.” (Mark 16:7) Peter had probably comprehended but little when Jesus explained to him that those who lose their lives in the divinely-directed service of God would save them. However, now it would seem that Jesus, by calling special attention to the fact of his resurrection, was driving the lesson home to Peter’s mind and heart. No doubt, Jesus’ thought was, “Tell Peter that my life has been saved. He wanted me to save it by selfishly avoiding the privilege of sacrifice. Like men of the world, he considered it foolish that in an emergency I should think of anyone but myself. He thought I should protect myself, but when you tell him that I have been raised from the dead, he will realize that my life has been saved in God’s way, not by following the worldly principle of self first.”

OVERCOMING THE WORLD

Overcoming the world means that in living up to the terms of our consecration we stand against the principle of selfishness with which we are surrounded on every hand, and continue to lay down

our lives unselfishly in the service of God, the Truth and the brethren. As Christians, we have been called out of the world, and we are to remain separate from it, not permitting ourselves to be influenced by its self-interested viewpoint. It is not yet the due time for reforming the world nor for changing its general viewpoint of self first to that of self-sacrifice. Thus, the test upon us is to continue to be separate from the world while, by abandoning the self first viewpoint, we endeavor to lose our lives in the cause of divine love and service.

Overcoming the world has far more serious implications than merely to refrain from participating in some of its pleasures. Indeed, many of the world's pleasures are selfishly inspired, and hence should be shunned by those endeavoring to overcome the world. Let us not think, however, that we are faithful overcomers simply because we stay away from these things.

As followers of the Master we are being prepared to share with him in the rulership of God's new world, hence we are being trained in the principles of love. Under the influence of love we are losing our lives in sacrifice. This does not mean that we have no joy in life. In fact, if we are living up to our privileges, the joy of the Lord will be ours. If, on the other hand, we have not learned to appreciate the way of love and sacrifice sufficiently to find in it, and in the promises of God associated with it, a fully satisfying portion which more than compensates for all the trifling joys of this world, we should examine our hearts to find out what is wrong. If we have to go to the world to find pleasurable diversions while we lay down our lives

for God, we might seriously question whether or not we are as victorious as we should be along these lines.

The tribulation we have in the world which Jesus spoke of in our opening text, will be in proportion to the degree that our course in life runs counter to the spirit of the world. The world loves its own, Jesus explained. (John 15:19) If the world does not find anything in us, or in our way of life, that is contrary to its own, then we may well question the course we have been taking or the degree of our overcoming.

However, if we are overcoming the world, we are bound, at some point, and in some way, to feel its opposition because, “in the world ye shall have tribulation.” (John 16:33) Nevertheless, we can “be of good cheer,” not because we rejoice in trouble, but because of this evidence of divine approval. We can have joy because of our faith in God’s promises that although we are now losing our earthly lives, giving up everything which the world considers valuable, we are sure to attain life “more abundantly,” for by “patient continuance in well doing” we are seeking for “glory and honour and immortality, eternal life.”—John 10:10; Rom. 2:7

“FOLLOW ME”

The world of Jesus’ day turned against him, and finally put him to death. We should expect no better treatment today. As Jesus explained, the servant cannot expect to be above his Master. (John 15:20) The reason the world hated Jesus was that his way of life was contrary to theirs. By his example of sacrifice he condemned their way of selfishness, and

by his teachings he exposed their widely-held errors, while teaching unpopular truths himself.

Like his disciples, we hear the Master's call, "Follow me." (Matt. 4:19) To follow Jesus means far more than merely to admire him. To walk faithfully in his footsteps means that our experiences in the world will be similar to his. He has "overcome the world," however, and we likewise can do the same if, like him, we keep before us the great objective of the divine will and confidently rely on the Heavenly Father's promised grace to help in time of need.—Heb. 4:16

As we soon partake of the Memorial emblems this year, let us rejoice more than ever in what they mean as symbols of Jesus' death as man's Redeemer. Let us also remember that because of this great redemptive work we now have the privilege of dying with Jesus by laying down our lives in doing God's will. If we are faithful in this we will be true overcomers, and have fulfilled in ourselves the promise of the Master, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne."—Rev. 3:21 ■