

The Conquest

By

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During Christ's last hours with the apostles He warned them that they would be hated and persecuted and even killed by those claiming to be doing God's work (John 15:18–21, 16:2). All this was to happen in spite of the promise (in the same hour) that they would be filled with the Holy Spirit and that he would answer their prayers.

At the conclusion of the promises and warning He said, "In the world you have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). This claim He made in spite of the fact that even as he spoke some of the world's rulers were about to take Him by force, subject Him to shame and torture and nail Him to a cross!

The churches of Asia which faced the hatred of both Jews and Romans during and after the tumultuous days of the destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD) were given bright promises based upon one condition: "He that overcomes" (Rev. 2 and 3).

The Christians of the first century faced staggering problems. They were surrounded by people mainly concerned with the wealth and pleasures of the world. The pagan culture glorified sexual abuse and heaped honors upon those who managed to reach places of power and fame, regardless of their immoral character. For a Christian to attain such a place it meant that he had to compromise, to keep his silence before his worldly social peers. (Read Church History.)

The government under which they lived was oppressive. Not only was taxation unjust and inequitable but property rights were often ignored by officials and one's home and all possessions could be confiscated on the slightest pretext with no recourse to jurisprudence. Still, they were expected to be of good cheer and overcome!

We face somewhat the same problems today. Sins which were too ugly to mention fifty years ago are now accepted as "alternate life-styles" and viewed on TV with some degree of pleasure in millions of homes. Public agencies funded by Congress and supported by leading citizens often attack the home, the church and the sanctity of life. Ours is a collapsing culture and there is no way that it can be propped up merely by patching the machinery, whether by economic or social reform. The collapse is not confined to our own nation. **We are in the throes of world-wide culture-convulsion, and every facet of life is involved.** Scripture indicates that the trend will continue to be downward until the end. Jesus raised the question, "When the Son of man comes, will He find the faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). **How, then, are we to overcome the world?**

Christians are being blitzed, often by their own church leaders, to launch a multitude of worthy human causes which may give them the feeling that they are really in there like good soldiers overcoming the enemy, but which, in reality, disengages them from the real warfare, pollutes their commitment and weakens their witness.

Overcoming the world is not accomplished by mounting the political barricades to put the right people in Washington. Sincere brethren often tell us that we must first secure our national freedom in order to be able to continue to serve God and preach the gospel, but they overlook the fact that the church and the gospel flourished among small groups of people for almost 17 centuries before this nation was born and continues to survive in

nations which do not benefit from our constitution and prosperity. There is never a hint in Scripture that the purpose of the gospel or the church was to secure financial prosperity and political freedom for the nations where it was preached, although there is ample evidence that such prosperity and freedom are by-products of the Christian system. The apostolic church was not a tool for altering governments but for altering individual lives. Christ didn't die to "save the republic" but to save sinners from sin and death.

Obviously, Christians want to preserve our national freedom and sovereignty. But if these are lost it will not be because someone cast the wrong vote in Washington, but because people are serving the wrong "god" in main-street, U.S.A. It will not be because they failed to overcome the enemy in Iran, or Russia or wherever, but because they failed to overcome the world in their own lives.

Survival programs have become a substitute for overcoming. These include everything from a simple how-to-booklet to a complete kit with a year's supply of dehydrated food, drums for gasoline storage, and parcels of land in hard-to-reach wilderness spots. About 20 years ago (1960) several preachers, including this one, were greatly aroused by threats to our national security, and made a trip to Colorado to survey possible cities for a "survival retreat." But after some careful thought we decided this would not be the way to invest the Lord's money, that it would not be the way to serve the Lord's people in time of crisis, and that time and energy needed to be spent in His work rather than in self-preservation.

Jesus did not advise His followers to find a refuge from the world's problems in hopes that the tribulation might pass them by. We already have a refuge: God. Christians facing persecution in the first century were not to occupy themselves with locating a mountain hideout and laying in enough supplies to survive until things were back to "normal." Rather, they "loved not their lives unto death..." even as the Apostle Paul, who said "...neither count I my life dear unto myself..." (Acts 20:24). Jesus must have known all the tricks of survival, but He led no survival seminars. Instead, He said that "He that finds his life shall lose it; and he that loses his life for my sake shall find it" (Mt. 10:39).

It is the Christian's business to enter into the world with the light of the truth, armed with faith and the Word of God. He is not called to defend the world—not even his own little corner of that world—but to bear a witness to the world concerning the eternal purpose of God.

Overcoming the world is something expected of every Christian, but not every believer is able and equipped to defeat the world's champions in a political or physical way; therefore, to "overcome" must refer to one's overcoming evil as he confronts it in his own life. This involves both an inward and an outward confrontation.

The first victory must be inward. It is the crucifixion of self. When one is baptized into Christ, he is baptized into Christ's death and reckons himself to be dead to sin (Rom. 6:3–11). He is no longer his own, but is bought with a price, and owes everything, including his life, to God. He must overcome every thought and desire that does not square with the will of God. Overcoming starts in one's own heart and mind. James writes that temptation comes from our selfish wills. "But each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed" (James 1:17).

Christ's great temptations did not begin as He faced His enemies in the crowd, but alone in the wilderness, with no one around but the devil. He had to fight the battle in His own heart and mind and win the victory there before confronting the outward foes.

This is just where the struggles must first be won for every Christian. Strife, divisions, divorce, lust, immorality, greed—all these deadly sins that are destroying the civilization—begin in the individual. The Christian is first to overcome them in his own life before going out to tackle the issues on a national scale. How can the church speak to the world about God's purpose when the church is bogged down in credit card covetousness? The first part of the world to overcome is that portion that has become a part of our own habit, ambition and desire. The purpose of God is as plain as day—that we should be like Him, in His image. “According as he has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish before him love” (Eph. 1:4).

What is desperately needed is for us to overcome the grip that the world has on any part of our lives until we have no desire for the world but an intense longing to be holy. While we are insufficient to accomplish this on our own power, it still can be done. “And this is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (I John 5:4).

There are outward confrontations of evil that are well-defined, such as pornography, witchcraft, government sponsored efforts to eliminate moral standards and usurp parental rights, and other forms of evil too numerous to name. But while we are to cry out against such evils and sound a clear warning against them, this is a negative approach, and not the means of overcoming them. Besides, it ignores the fact that man is a sinner since the fall of Adam, and to sin is natural. The approach God made was not to reform society but to redeem man. Our task is centered in this purpose.

Jesus compared His disciples to salt and light. Paul said that we are to “do all things without murmurings and questionings; that (we) may become blameless and harmless, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom (we) are seen as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life” (Phil. 2:14–16).

No murmurings? No questionings? How can one survive? That's just it. We are not called on to survive, but to be lights in the world—in just such a crooked and perverse generation as this. How is this overcome? By holding forth the word of life! This is what matters, that we hold up Christ and His truth. There will be resistance and tribulation. We are to expect it, but not to murmur and complain about it, nor ask, “Why does this happen to me?” It happens because the world is alienated from God and under His condemnation. The rebellion aimed at God lights up the Christian in whom God dwells through the Spirit. It's all right, because a Christian's life is already God's. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “When Jesus calls a man, he calls him to come and die.” The world cannot hurt him, and he has nothing in the world. He is not called to success, or survival or self-satisfaction, but to service, and all that counts is that he be faithful.

There is no way to escape the tribulation in the world except to be taken out of it at the coming of Christ before the great meltdown of judgment. Until then, the world is our field of service in pleasing Him. The world can oppose you but cannot defeat you, for Christ has already redeemed us out of this present evil world (Gal. 1:4). Our destiny as Christians is not to perish with the world, but to live in a new one “wherein dwells righteousness.” Be of good cheer!

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