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## THE OVERCOMER OF THE APOCALYPSE

JAMES E. ROSSCUP

*The problem of the identity of the "overcomer" in the book of Revelation has resulted in a multiplicity of interpretations. Interest in this issue has been heightened by a number of recent publications. However, only the view that all genuine believers are "overcomers," not only those who are "more victorious" in their Christian living, does justice to all the evidence. Thus, erroneous ideas of what it means to be an "overcomer" must be refuted. Maintaining the viewpoint that all true believers are "overcomers" also involves a defense of the doctrines of eternal security and of the perseverance of the saints.*

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**I**N Revelation 2-3, Christ addresses seven historical churches of Asia in which he discerns certain spiritual conditions. Similar conditions recur in churches that claim his name down through the centuries. In a letter to each of the seven churches he promises a specific blessing to every person who overcomes (νικάω, "to overcome," "be victor"). It is profitable to inquire into the nature of the blessing (reward) for overcoming, but the main purpose in this article is to address one question: *who is the overcomer* who receives the reward?

### A SURVEY OF MAIN VIEWS

The leading interpretations are:

*A saved person who retains salvation, which some forfeit*

Those persuaded to this view often hold that all seven promises pertain only to that number among the saved who finally prove

faithful, whether or not their commitment reaches martyrdom. In this interpretation, some who once were truly saved do not persevere; they forfeit the privilege of ever receiving the final reward, understood as eternal salvation, which Christ promises the overcomer.<sup>1</sup> A variation, however, is the position of Kiddle. He sees the overcomer as *especially* the martyr in all seven letters, and limits him *only* to the martyr in two cases.<sup>2</sup>

*A saved person who conquers, distinguished from a defeated Christian*

This interpretation is to the effect that the overcomer is only the more victorious believer, so only such a one will receive the rewards Christ promises. The saved person with much unfaithfulness mingled with some fruit in his life will still remain saved eternally. He stands simply to fail to gain aspects of reward that are held to be distinct from salvation, blessings sometimes claimed to be *in addition to* salvation,<sup>3</sup> which Christ assures to the overcomer. Evidence for the

<sup>1</sup>Guy Duty, *If Ye Continue* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1966), 148–55; G. H. Lang, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (London: Oliphants, Ltd., 1945), 91–108, especially 91–93; Robert Shank, *Life in the Son* (Springfield, Missouri: Westcott Publishers, 1961), 337.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (Moffatt NTC; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963). Kiddle's two cases are Rev 2:26–28 (p. 42) and 3:21 with 20:4, 5 (p. 63). Only the martyr, having been fully proved and having fully proved his faithfulness, is assured "beyond any shadow of uncertainty" as to his immortality (p. 46; cf. also p. 62). Five of the promises are not alone to the martyr but to all the faithful among the saved. For example, *all* whose names are found in the Book of Life in the Day of Judgment are admitted into the New Jerusalem (2:7; 21:27; 22:2, p. 62). But the saved who do not persevere lose the "citizenship of the heavenly society" (p. 45; also 55), for they can yet be erased from the book (3:5; p. 62). The two cases Kiddle limits *only* to martyrs probably should not be so restricted. The promise of ruling with Christ (2:26–28; 3:21; 20:4, 5) seems to be a prospect for all of those among the saved, without excluding some (5:9, 10; 22:5). So 5:9, 10 and 22:5 expand on 20:4, 5. An analogy is the crown of life, promised to those faithful unto death (2:10). It is elsewhere assured to all who endure testing, without specifying *unto death* (James 1:12). Rev 2:10 can hold up the bright promise as a powerfully relevant encouragement in the crisis of martyrdom since Smyrna was one place where death was especially a peril for the saved. To be reminded of "life" which would overcome a martyr's death would be particularly meaningful when death could be so imminent. I. Howard Marshall, in evaluating and showing weaknesses of Kiddle's conception, argues rightly that blessings Christ promises the overcomer in Revelation 2–3 he pledges to *all* the redeemed in other passages of the Apocalypse (*Kept By the Power of God* [Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975], 453–54, n. 3).

<sup>3</sup>Donald G. Barnhouse, *Messages to the Seven Churches* (Philadelphia: Eternity Book Service, 1953). He reasons that eating from the tree of life (2:7) is for *only some* of the saved, a blessing "in addition to salvation" (p. 38); the crown of life is *only* for "the select few whom He chooses to suffer with Him, even unto physical death," or

third view, while not exhaustive, will hopefully show that this conception does not adequately account for the biblical testimony.

### *Every saved person*

All of the genuinely saved will turn out to be overcomers and receive the reward Christ promises them.<sup>4</sup> When Scripture is properly correlated, it supports this view. Considerations that point in this direction now follow.

#### SUPPORT FOR THE THIRD VIEW

1. 1 John 5:4, 5 more naturally favors this explanation. Verse 4 says that whatever has been born of God overcomes the world. The key to being born of God is believing that Jesus is the Messiah (v 1). The key to overcoming, whether in this rebirth or in matters that follow, is faith (v 4b). Every person who believes that Jesus is the Son of God is an overcomer (v 5), just as everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah has been born of God (v 1). Believing in Jesus as the Messiah and as Son of God appears also in John 20:30, 31. There, those who believe have life (cf. 1 John 5:10, 11, 13). And in John 20 as well as 1 John 5, the assertions embrace *every* saved person.

Verse 4 shows that John is not claiming that the person by virtue of what he is in himself automatically is able to overcome. The power within him, the dynamic of God's life, is what overcomes. "Whatever is born of God" features the neuter gender, and draws attention to the

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those otherwise faithful (2:10; James 1:12, p. 47). Cf. also p. 84. Barnhouse, discussing some of the seven promises, does not follow through with remarks that suggest any such distinction, but expounds the aspects of reward just as if he thinks they are blessings *all* the saved will receive. This poses a question as to his consistency (cf. 2:17, pp. 56-57; 3:5, pp. 74-75; 3:21, pp. 94-95). Or, Barnhouse simply does not comment, as in the promise of not being hurt by the second death (2:11, p. 47). Cf. for this view also several master's theses at Dallas Theological Seminary: Ralph D. Richardson, "The Johannine Doctrine of Victory," 1955, pp. 20-29; R. R. Benedict, "The Use of *Nikaō* in the Letters to the Seven Churches of Revelation," 1966, p. 13; Wm. R. Ross, Jr., "An Analysis of the Rewards and Judgments in Revelation 2 and 3," 1971, p. 20; Harlan D. Betz, "The Nature of Rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ," 1974, pp. 36-45.

<sup>4</sup>L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 3.306; W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 173-83; R. E. Manahan, "'Overcomes the World'—1 John 5:4," M.Div. Thesis (Winona Lake, Indiana: Grace Theological Seminary, 1970), 38, 39; for a longer categorizing of views, cf. 28-43; William Newell, *The Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1935), 42, 52, 339; John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 97f., 118-25; Lehman Strauss, *The Book of the Revelation* (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1964), 108; John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 59 (2:7) and 98-99 (3:20).

very principle of overcoming "in its most general and abstract form."<sup>5</sup> It lays special focus on the victorious *power*, not the person himself. But in v 5 the focus turns to "the person who overcomes the world." *God himself* is the resource of victory as in 4:4: "You . . . have overcome them; because greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world" (cf. Christ as overcomer in John 16:33; Rev 5:5; 17:14).

In v 4, literally, "For whatever has been born and is born of God (perfect tense) overcomes (present tense) the world." John adds: "and this is the victory that has overcome (νικήσασα) the world—our faith." The aorist can refer back to a definite act of victory over the world by faith at conversion, or any past resolute act or trend of rejecting error in doctrine after conversion (1 John 4:4), or a past by-faith life-style of having overcome the world gathered up as a whole, and, of course, including the other instances of overcoming (cf. ἔγνων in 4:8). The last appears more probable in view of the perfect tense for being born, a fact that still stands true, and the present tense for a customary pattern preceding the aorist in v 4.

Verse 5 goes on to utilize present tenses, quite plausibly customary or iterative presents, to denote the general overall pattern of overcoming for the Christian who believes in an ongoing sense (v 1, πιστεύω, present tense) that Jesus is the Son of God. Later, in Revelation 2–3, "he who overcomes" is virtually the same as "he who believes." As Robertson says: ". . . *nikaō* [is] a common Johannine verb. . . Faith is dominant in Paul, victory in John, faith is victory (1 John 5:4)."<sup>6</sup> John also uses the present tense of νικάω in Revelation 2–3, suggesting that continuing victory is characteristic of the saved just as continuing faith is (1 John 5:1).

Does every saved person in fact overcome in the Christian struggle? In the biblical sense, yes. The context emphasizes attitudes of commitment that continue. For example, "whoever loves (v 1b, present tense) the Father who begets loves (present tense) the one begotten by him," i.e., another saved person. Verses 2 and 3 stress that Christians manifest their love by love for God and obeying him. This obedience is not an irksome burden. The "for" which connects v 4 with v 3 links overcoming in v 4 with obedience through love in the Christian life that follows one's initial act of faith and his new birth. A distinction between two genuine Christians would not be that one overcomes the world in the present tense way that John means and the other does not. Rather, both overcome though one may overcome to a richer, more thorough degree than another. And any Christian might overcome to a further degree as he matures in Christ.

<sup>5</sup>Stott, 174.

<sup>6</sup>A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in The New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1930), 6.300.

2. 1 John 4:4 shows that the "little children" have "overcome them," i.e., every spirit of antichrist in the world. "Children" (τέκνα) and "little children" (τέκνια) are common Johannine words for *all* believers. In 1 John, these words refer to *all* of the saved except for "children" of Satan (3:10) and possibly in 2:12.<sup>7</sup> Most instances definitely mean *all* of the saved (2:1, 28; 3:1, 2, 7, 10, 18; 4:4; 5:2, 21).

God's power is the resource for overcoming; as John claims: "greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world" (4:4b). Reasonably, "you" finally applies to *all* of the saved, in that the resource of the Lord being greater is not limited to a special class among the saved. The contrast is between the saved—*all* of them—and those of the world.

3. Rev 21:7 refers to any saved person. "He who overcomes shall inherit these things." The context conveys the natural impression that blessings the overcomer inherits are for *any* saved person. God shall dwell among his people (v 3); he wipes away every tear (v 4); there is no death, mourning, crying or pain (v 4); he makes all things new (v 5). The passage distinguishes most naturally between only two broad classes. If an interpreter claims he finds a third group, he reads it in from a preconceived system, not from a natural exegesis of what the text says. First, the text refers to the person who overcomes, inherits, and is a son of God (v 7). Then, it immediately contrasts those clearly unsaved, cowardly, unbelieving, who are not inheritors of the city but inhabitants of the lake of fire (v 8). The same contrast between *two* categories of people appears in these climactic verses (21:27; 22:11, 14, 15). In 21:27, *all* whose names are in the Lamb's book of life are marked off from any person who is "unclean" and "who practices abomination and lying." Those in the Lamb's book apparently have practiced a clean, godly life since being saved (cf. 3:4, 5; 19:8; also cf. Titus 2:11ff.). That involves overcoming, though saints can differ in their degree of overcoming and in the suitable degree of reward!

So it appears that, in distinction to the unsaved, John means that "he who overcomes" is *any* saved person. He is not one of a special class among the saved, a spiritual victor in contrast to a saint who is supposedly not a victor.

<sup>7</sup>In 2:12 the word *possibly* refers to the same group as παῖδια in v 14. If so, John addresses the believers by three designations in the same order, 1-2-3, 1-2-3. In v 18, παῖδια seems to mean *all* the believers. If τέκνια in v 12 means all the born again, it of course would fit well with our view in 4:4. Even if it distinguishes *one group among* the born again, the recent converts (a sense different from its usage in the rest of 1 John), it would not actually detract from our view. This is because τέκνια has well-established reference to all the born again everywhere else in 1 John (except 3:10). And 4:4 appears to bear this sense.

4. The overall concept in 1 John gives one confidence that John thinks of *all* who are born of God as overcomers. Real obedience can assure one that he indeed knows Christ (2:4). A person who hates a brother in that pervasive, continuing pattern that John's present tense embraces in a sweep is not a bona fide Christian. He *never* was, for John carefully tells us that he "is in darkness until now [or even now, i.e., he is *still* there]" (2:9). John does *not* say that he is in darkness in some particular experience of the moment only. Later, not only some of the saved but "every one" who has his hope in Christ purifies himself as Christ is pure (3:3; cf. Titus 2:11ff.). He does that in the dynamic of faith which overcomes (5:4, 5), enabled by the One within him (4:4b). Faith sets the desire at work within him to be like his Savior. At the same time, "anyone" who does not practice righteousness in the present tense way is not of God (3:10).

John insists that in "every one" who is a Christian there will emerge distinct characteristics of an authentically overcoming life. These are characteristics such as obedience, loving a brother, purifying the life, practicing righteousness, and being kept from the evil one (cf. 5:18). The frequent present tense suggests an overall trend of life. This is not a set, static mold but dynamic. It allows for growth; it does not denote absolute, sinless perfection now! In fact, while John insists on marks of a Christian life-style for one who has eternal life, and even boldly claims that one who is born of God does not sin,<sup>8</sup> he

<sup>8</sup>This may be variously explained. Zane Hodges relates 3:6, 9 to the saved "when he is viewed only as 'abiding' or as one who is 'born of God.' That is, sin is never the product of our abiding experience . . . of the regenerate self per se." He adduces Rom 7:20-25; Paul sins, yet can say "It is no longer I that do it" (*The Gospel Under Siege: A Study on Faith and Works* [Dallas: Redención Viva, 1981], 60). H. Bonar argues that "cannot" (as 3:6) need not deny absolutely that a thing can occur but that it is "wholly against the nature of things," e.g., Matt 7:18, "a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit" contrary to its nature, though it sometimes does; Mark 2:19, men "cannot" fast while the Bridegroom is with them; it is incongruous and unnatural; Luke 11:7b; 14:20; John 7:7; 8:43, etc. (*God's Way of Holiness* [Chicago: Moody, (n.d.)], 99; similarly, though arguing differently, R. E. O. White, *An Open Letter to Evangelicals* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 86). I. H. Marshall refers 3:6, 9 to what the Christian *ought* to be, his *ideal character*, free from sin insofar as he abides; it is an eschatological fact, conditioned on "if he lives in Christ" (*The Epistles of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 180-84). Cf. John R. W. Stott's arguments against an *ideal* view (*The Epistles of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 132-34). Stott himself favors a common view that the present tenses refer to sin as an overall, habitual pattern without the victory that Christ gives when he is within (pp. 131-32). C. C. Ryrie, a colleague of Hodges, inclines to this view ("The First Epistle of John," *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. C. Pfeiffer and E. F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 1473; similarly Leon Morris, "1 John, 2 John, 3 John," *New Bible Commentary: Revised* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970], 1265; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in The New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1933), 6.222. Sin as a *pattern* also appears to be in

is aware that acts of sin can break into the experience of real Christians (1:9, 2:1, aorist tense twice; 3:3, implied possibility). But, while aggressive for a godly life-style, he shows that God in Christ has graciously made provision to forgive and cleanse sin when the one born of God does falter (1:7, 9; 2:1, 2).

5. If in Revelation 2-3 God will admit some saved persons into eternal blessing but not the aspects of reward meant for the overcomer, these chapters never spell out what *their* aspects of blessing will be. The curtain of silence drawn on a distinguishable future for a non-overcoming group of the saved provokes a serious question. Does such a saved group, which is to gain some reward distinct in its essential nature from that of committed believers, in fact exist?

The rest of the Book of Revelation does not mark off such a group in a convincingly recognizable way. A multitude of overcomers in 15:2 partake of certain privileges beyond this life. If some of the saved in heaven have not overcome, God never definitely distinguishes them as being in a special category and extends them any encouragement, such as "You at least have eternal life; you will dwell in the presence of the Lord forever." The book nowhere identifies *any* saved who enter into *any* kind of ultimate blessing except those naturally understood as overcomers, who are marked by obedience to the Word of God (as 3:8, 10; 6:9; 12:11; 13:8; 14:9-12; 22:7, 9, 11). Passages which say directly that eternal life is free (1:5; 7:14, 21:6; 22:14, 17) are no exception to this. They can be grasped in relation to their contexts, rather than misconstrued in isolation or in inept correlations with other texts. Other verses in the contexts nearby usually refer to the life-style that the people of faith live, which manifests the faith that received the gift and works in channels of committed love, as in Gal 5:6 (22:7, 9, 11, 12). In 21:6, access to the water of life is "without cost." Yet in 7:9, 15-18 access to the springs of the water of life is a blessing after the saints wash their robes in Christ's blood and

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view in Gal 5:21, where it can keep a man from inheriting God's kingdom in that it reflects lack of faith that works through love (5:6). John Murray relates 1 John 3:6, 9 to the sin of rejecting Christ, denying that he has come in the flesh, that he is the Son of God, a specific sin as in certain other texts (John 9:41; 15:22; 1 John 4:2, 3; 5:1, etc.) ("Definitive Sanctification," *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 [1967] 10-13). Murray, however, does not sufficiently explain the present tense, which John uses often in contrasts between *godly* aspects and *sins* in general, such as loving or not loving (cf., for example, often in 3:4-10 which contrasts sons of God and sons of the devil, as compared with the aorist tense twice in 2:1).

Sin sometimes does not appear to be *the specific sin* Murray has in mind. Any of the above views is compatible with the concept that every saved person is an overcomer. At this juncture it appears best to see true elements in each view but agree most fully with Ryrie and Stott; to argue sufficiently would demand another article, but cf. Stott's rather detailed reasoning.



come out of great tribulation. The saints involved indeed "paid the price" in terms of commitment that lived out faith, being true to Christ's cause; but they did not pay any "cost" in the sense of *earning* or *meriting* access to that water of life! Jesus paid it all by his blood (7:14)!

NT passages outside the Apocalypse refer to *all* of the saved in terms which classify them as victors *in other ways*. So they are plausibly victors in their *life-styles* as well, in some vital degree. Paul sees all the saved as victors over death (1 Cor 15:54) and over every threat in general (Rom 8:37). His statement in 8:37 follows in context after 8:14 which shows what characterizes the saved: "as many as are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." Paul is convinced that those persons are true sons of God who are led by God's Spirit. If this characteristic reveals the real sons, the life-styles of the sons evidently feature some degree of overcoming.

6. There are reasonable solutions to the problems of this preferred view. Many reactions turn out to be "straw men" made from the stuff of misconceptions about how certain details best integrate into a harmonious, overall picture.

Take, for instance, this claim: many who are saved do not, in fact, overcome. Evaluation: If we do not decide by rare cases like death-bed converts or the thief on the cross, we may still acknowledge that *every* saved person with normal time and opportunity fails to overcome some or many times in his life-span following his new birth. All fall short of absolute, sinless perfection. Still, the real point is that the Bible by its terminology describes the saved person as belonging within a general class of people. He follows in the direction of faith toward God in the thrust of his life. Christ's words embrace *all* the saved, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me . . ." (John 10:27). Admittedly, these sheep are inconsistent. At times they wander, follow at a strained distance, or temporarily go in the opposite direction from God's will, as in Ps 119:176. Jonah is a further example. Yet Jesus did not hesitate to define his people, *all* of them, as those who "hear" and "follow." These words in the present tense look at more than the initial act of faith alone. They do look at this, to be sure, but also survey the sweep of their lives, the basic direction and bent of character and action. The sheep persist despite failures along life's trail. Some true followers of Christ may overcome to a lesser degree than others, but all fit within the panorama of Jesus' words.

Hodges unfortunately diminishes the statement of John 10:27 into a myopic either/or logic: ". . . the term 'follow' is simply another Johannine metaphor for saving faith. . . . It is a mistake to construe the word 'follow' in John 10:27 as though it indicates something about the future of the believer's experience after he receives eternal

life. In fact, it has nothing to do with it at all. . . ."<sup>9</sup> This does not appear to hold up because:

(1) "Follow" in its usage applies *both* to the first step in responding to Christ for salvation *and* to the subsequent process of the life as believers. The word "to follow," ἀκολουθέω, often appears to relate to the entire sweep of obedient discipleship and is not confined only to initial salvation in John's Gospel (8:12; 10:4, 5; 12:26, "follow" seems co-extensive with "serve"; 21:19, 22, both refer to Peter *after* he was saved initially). The other gospels use the term also in a far wider sense than only the beginning step of faith (Matt 4:20; 8:19, 22, 23; 19:27, 28; Lk 9:23, "daily"; 9:57, "wherever you go"; 9:62, following Jesus involves putting one's hand to the plow and going on with it along the furrow; 18:28; cf. Rev 14:4, etc.). "Hear" and "follow," like the word "abides" in John 6:56, even become *characteristics* of the truly saved.

(2) It is grammatically natural, in view of present indicative actives ἀκούουσιν and ἀκολουθοῦσιν, to relate the statement even to general life-style. To bind the verbs *only* to the initial act of faith appears shortsighted.

(3) Relating the verbs to *ongoing* lives fits the natural, pastoral metaphor of "sheep" that Jesus selects (10:2-5). A shepherd put his sheep out for the day and then went ahead of them. They "heard" and "followed" him, not simply in the first act of coming after him but for all day and many days.

(4) Hodges draws a questionable conclusion as to Jesus' placing his promise to "give them eternal life" (v 28) *after* "hear" and "follow." He reasons that if "hear" and "follow" relate at all to believers *after initial salvation* the order of the promise demands that believers must have followed to *earn* the eternal life. But contrary to his fears, "hear" and "follow" pose no element incompatible with eternal life through grace. The order is similar to that in Matt 19:29. There, to all who in faith sacrificially have left houses, lands, and loved ones for Jesus' sake, he will give many times as much (Mk 10:29 and Lk 18:29 say *in this life*) and eternal life. While from one perspective he can give eternal life already now initially in grace, he can also promise life in its full potential for blessing in its ultimate, crowning sense as the greatest prospect of grace that can encourage believers. A life of faith that works through obedient love leads on to the finest realization of all that is worthwhile; it can never turn out to have been in vain!

This interpretation is more reasonable than Hodges' system, which sees eternal life now as a free gift but construes eternal life in its future aspect as "a reward merited" by obedience.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Hodges, *Gospel Under Siege*, 44-45.

<sup>10</sup>Hodges, *Gospel Under Siege*, 82.

Some reject the view this article defends on another claim. They misconstrue it as tantamount to saying that none of the saved can backslide. Lang charges: "It avoids and nullifies the solemn warnings and urgent pleadings of the Spirit addressed to believers, and, by depriving the Christian of these, leaves him dangerously exposed to the perils they reveal. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

Evaluation: First, it is a "straw man" argument to insist that the logic of the favored view means none of the saved can backslide. Actually, while all the truly saved will be overcomers, all can and still do commit sins in this life (James 3:2). Never in this life will they scale heights beyond the need for further purification from sins (1 John 3:3). Christ has made provision for this need when they sin (1 John 2:1, 2). Some flounder in sad seasons of spiritual failure, but do not *lose* salvation even if for a time they seem no longer to have it. New revivals may be needed to stir them afresh to a closer walk with God, but Christ's marks of his true sheep are that they "hear" and "follow." The overcoming vitality of God-given faith (cf. 1 John 5:4, 5) and care as a practical dynamic doggedly continues to reassert itself in their experience (cf. Ps 119:176). And in a total lifetime as believers God's people will, despite times of decline, bear some fruit (Rom 6:22).

Second, a trait of true faith is that it gives a heart to heed God's warnings, gain victory (1 John 5:4, 5), and forge on with him. Those whose believing on the Savior is backed by reality continue with him, as in John 8:31 and John 15:1-6.<sup>12</sup> The truly saved ones are the brand of people who, when they sin, confess, seek God's forgiveness and cleansing, and desire to live in the light with God (1 John 1:5-9). If they are negligent here, God may take them home to heaven early (1 Cor 11:30-32). That those who "believed" in John 8:30, or at least some among them, were not genuinely saved is the natural import of Jesus' words directly aimed at his audience in the following verses (vv 31-49). While "believe" in the Gospel of John usually refers to true faith, the term can even be used for a superficial belief that does not turn out to be properly based and genuine (2:23; 7:31; 12:42; cf. 6:66).

Third, the favored view allows the possibility that some may for a time be thought to be true believers, yet not heed the warnings, and end up unsaved. This does not reveal that they *lost* salvation but that they *lacked* it all along. This is true despite the fact that they professed allegiance to the Lord, as in Matt 7:23 and 1 John 2:19.

<sup>11</sup>Lang, *Revelation*, 91-92.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. J. E. Rosscup, *Abiding in Christ: Studies in John 15* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973): those in 15:1-6 who do not abide and bear fruit (v 15:2a etc.) are not saved and never were (cf. all the saved abiding in John 6:54, 56).

A further objection against the preferred view is the context of Revelation 2-3. This material concerns *churches*, *Christians*, and their *works*. So, the argument goes, the issue of salvation has already been settled and the passage cannot pertain to salvation; it only relates to *Christian* living of the surely *saved*. Evaluation: Christ is speaking to churches! But often NT passages which address believers weave in warnings that lift an appeal even to the unsaved. These, mingled among the saved, may fancy themselves as saved and be insensitive to their need. The tough words register a healthy, sobering effect on two groups. First are those who really are saved but are living in backslidden slackness. Second, some among the fellowships might not prove to have been in fact begotten of God. Their character, attitudes, words and works can betray their barrenness, and they stand in grave peril. So the issue of salvation can be relevant even in a *church* context. The lack of salvation's fruit and bearing of bad fruit can reveal men as counterfeit or at least place them under suspicion.

In the church at Pergamum "those who hold" the teachings of Balaam, who support idolatry and immorality (2:14), are probably not saved. One might, of course, allow himself to fall into immorality as David did, then recover in sterling repentance (Ps 51). Still, the NT even in *church* contexts associates a life pattern of immorality with the sobering peril of not inheriting the future kingdom. Failure to inherit the kingdom due to tolerating a sinfully indulgent life-style must mean that one will turn out not to be saved (1 Cor 6:9-11; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:3-5; cf. n. 17). Also, other NT references to Balaam do not register the impression that we are to think of him as saved or as ever having been saved (2 Pet 2:15; cf. v 17; Jude 11<sup>13</sup>). Those in the church or under the influence of the church's message who follow the Balaam-like teaching of the Nicolaitans, if they do not repent, will find Christ waging war against them with the sword of his mouth (Rev 2:16)! Since the kind of war that Christ pursues with the sword of his mouth is later clearly against the "beast," "false prophet," and their unsaved hosts (19:11ff.), the guilty ones in the church context of Pergamum are likewise probably unsaved. They need to repent and gain the real faith.

Another criticism of the proposed view lies in the question: if all the saved are sure to overcome and receive the crown, why does Rev 3:11 warn lest one *lose* the crown?<sup>14</sup> Ironside, favoring a variation of view two as described at the outset of this article, held that

<sup>13</sup>Jude 11 combines the "error of Balaam" with "the way of Cain" and "the rebellion of Korah." Cain is unsaved unless 1 John 3:12 is misconstrued. Jude, by linking Balaam and Korah with Cain, suggests that he, assuming agreement with John about Cain, thinks them unsaved.

<sup>14</sup>Betz, "The Nature of Rewards." 36.

one *saved* man may "take" *for himself* the very crown of reward that another *saved* person might have gained.<sup>15</sup> He illustrates. A Christian gospel tract distributor, discouraged by seeing little fruit, gave up his ministry. Later he spotted another Christian man fulfilling his old task in the same vicinity. The man even handed *him* a tract. Smitten with heart-broken remorse, the recipient cried, "Oh, you have taken away my crown!" However, Rev 3:11 more probably refers to an unsaved persecutor who can "take" the crown from a person who has only a professed relationship with Christ and his church. The victim permits an enemy of his soul to first seduce him away from committing himself in true faith, and then from living the life of faith that leads on to the crown (as James 1:12; Rev 2:10, indeed all the crown passages). So the seducer does not by his work against Christ's cause take the crown *for himself*. He *prevents* his victim from gaining it. A person even in the church membership or attendance may fail to gain the crown in that he turns away from the things Christ summons him to face steadfastly. When put to the test, he denies the Lord and the faith. And so, having never genuinely received the free gift of eternal life to begin with, he fails finally to secure the crown which consists of eternal life. Christ promises this crown to those trusting him in real faith that results in faithfulness (2:10; cf. Eph 2:10).

This interpretation differs from Ironside's and is the probable meaning of 3:11 because: (1) False leaders diverted many in the OT (Ezek 22:25-28) and the NT (Matt 24:11; Gal 5:7; Col 2:4; 2 Tim 2:17, 18; Rev 2:14, 15, 20-25). (2) Rev 3:11 is similar in thrust to cases where men *prevent* others from an effectual relationship with God and entering into his kingdom (Matt 23:13; Luke 11:52). (3) The exhortation to "hold fast what *you have*" is compatible with the preferred view. Those surely saved *will* heed the exhortation, persevere, and hold what they do have. But others, though mingling in a local church and claiming a relationship, do not genuinely possess it (cf. Rev. 2:24; 3:4 in context). They are allowing someone opposed to God to take from them—to prevent from being theirs in reality—what they could have by true faith. So far they only *think* they have the reality (cf. Luke 8:18). (4) God can *take* away a man's part from the tree of life (Rev 22:19). He does not take it *for himself*, but prevents the man from gaining what potentially might have been his, because the person has not really grasped the privilege by faith. Rather, he has worked against God.

To be finally deprived of the crown does not infer, then, that a person at one time was genuinely saved and qualifying for it but later is not. The idea is not the forfeiture of salvation one has. It is the

<sup>15</sup>H. A. Ironside, *Salvation and Reward* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers [n.d.]), 31-32.

tragedy of losing out on what potentially might be given. None of the truly elect will turn away from Christ and fail to heed his warning and persevere: all will gain the crown that the context specifies, namely "the crown which consists of [eternal] life" (Rev 2:10).<sup>16</sup>

Still a further objection to the favored view is this. Exhortations in Revelation 2-3 can be relevant only for the *saved* because the Bible never makes an appeal to the *unsaved* about works. For the unsaved works are *not* the issue. God's summons to them is to believe. Evaluation: This generalization overlooks much in the Bible. Certainly it is true that no man can merit salvation by works. Yet this is not incompatible with another emphasis, that God calls on men to do the works they can do by faith if they only will respond to God's grace. God appeals to Cain (Gen 4:7), and Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:27). John the Baptist calls on religious but unsaved men to bring forth fruit that corresponds with repentance (Matt 3:8). Paul is concerned for those at Corinth, some of whom may prove to be "rejected" (ἀδόκιμοι), not having Christ in them (2 Cor 13:5-7).

Then, some reject this view due to what they believe about church membership. They reason that the standards Revelation 2-3 describes for the overcomer fit *some* Christians but are not true of *all* of the saved in churches. They do not imply this with regard to churches that do not pervasively teach the Bible, but Bible-teaching churches. Scores in these churches do not appear to experience anything that convincingly links them with an overcoming life. Yet, the logic assumes, they *must* be saved. Evaluation: Scores do not appear to know this overcoming life, but all *genuine* Christians do, at least in some degree. Even in the days of Jesus, John, and Paul, many punctiliously bound themselves to certain forms of belief and conduct. But they lacked the reality with God that real faith fosters.

Others react against the proposed view by rejecting a caricature, a straw man they have erected. They imagine that it requires unrealistically that a Christian measure up to an ideal, super life to be a real Christian and an overcomer. Evaluation: As in other NT descriptions of Christian living (i.e., abiding, being a disciple, serving, following Christ as sheep, mortifying the flesh, loving Christ, enduring trials,

<sup>16</sup>The *Father* and *Christ* secure the saved in their hand from falling out of salvation. No one will pluck them out (John 10:28, 29). Christ defined his "sheep" as those who "hear" and "follow" (cf. Sect. 2, No. 6 of this article), not implying that such sheep can be lost again if they cease to persevere, as if they may not persevere, but to assume that they surely do persevere. God's preservation further assures their perseverance. One has to read into the passage what it does not say to have it teach that some defined as true sheep may, *on their own initiative*, fall, jump, or wiggle out of God's hand. Christ also prays for preservation of the saved (John 17:11, 12, 15, 24), as he prayed Peter's faith would not fail, and it did not, though sorely tested (Luke 22:31, 32; cf. Rom 8:34).

etc.), the difference between two real Christians is not that one is overcoming in the overall picture while the other is not. The real difference is that one is overcoming to a fuller, deeper, or more thoroughly consistent degree than the other. The extent of Christian commitment, maturity, receptivity to the Word of God, and abandonment to God's will enter into this matter. Two bona fide Christians may be at widely different stages of growth in regard to these and yet both be overcoming, manifesting the fruit of faith to men or to God or both in differing degrees, measure and consistency.

A final objection is this. The "crown of life" supposedly denotes a special capacity to enjoy "eternal life," sometimes said to be distinct from or *added to* "eternal life" that every saved person will have.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Cf. this and similar views in Benedict, "The Use of *Nikaō*," 13-15; Ross, "Rewards and Judgments," 19-20; Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit: Refreshing Insights on Salvation, Discipleship, and Rewards* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 113-14, 119; and Hodges, *Gospel Under Siege*, en toto. Hodges insists rightly that eternal life is free to the sinner. Then he has a problem with the concept that Christ promises aspects of reward to the overcomer as encouragements for discipleship that can be costly (*The Hungry Inherit*, 114). He distinguishes truly committed believers who will *inherit* the future kingdom from other saved men who only *enter* it (cf. also his *Gospel Under Siege*, 115-16, 120). In Scripture, however, to "inherit the kingdom" and to "enter the kingdom" are, for all intents and purposes synonymous (B. Klappert, "Kind," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976], 2.387-88). Leon Morris defines κληρονομέου in 1 Cor 6:10 as "enter into full possession of" (*The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958], 97). G. Abbott-Smith defines the word "to inherit . . . possess oneself of, receive as one's own, obtain . . . of the Messianic Kingdom . . . and its blessings and privileges" (*A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956], 248). All the saved will receive = obtain = inherit the blessings, each in what God deems the appropriate degree, position, capacity, role of higher service (Rev 22:3) appropriate to the way in which they prepared for this in present service (cf. Luke 19:17, 19; 1 Cor 3:8, etc.). Yet God's rewarding is not strictly tit for tat but on an order of lavish grace that far exceeds any human calculation or any idea of earning. Observe the "hundred times as much," or "many times," and "eternal life besides" in Matt 19:29 with its parallels, and cf. 2 Cor 4:17f.

Another Hodges' distinction allows eternal life to be a gift to all the saved, but heirship and sonship *not* a gift, rather *earned* by only some of the saved through faithful living (*The Hungry Inherit*, 119). So, in Rev 21:6, 7 where we see *one* class, Hodges makes two (*The Hungry Inherit*, 113-14): one thirsts and receives freely as a gift the water of life, a second overcomes and inherits! This scheme fails to integrate both aspects as true of the *one* category of person who is both *in* the New Jerusalem and *inherits* it, who contrasts with a second class that is excluded in v 8. Actually, in Revelation 21-22 *every* saved person enjoys *every* blessing described in the context. Hodges brings his distinction into the text against the more natural sense of things the text sees as a unit. The NT is clear that eternal life is a gift, yet is compatible with this in saying that eternal life as this gift is the fitting blessed outcome of a way of life lived in faith through grace for the sake of Christ, his gospel, his kingdom (Matt 19:29 = Mark 10:29 = Luke 18:29; cf. Rom 6:22). Sonship is a gift when one is initially saved (John 1:12), like heirship (Rom 4:13). But alas, Hodges unveils another artificial distinction: all the saved will inherit glory, but only co-sufferers, overcomers will

The logic of this claim is that God does not confer eternal life as a blessing that can be called a reward for men being faithful in life's struggles; he bestows life as a free gift which they receive by faith. A Christian already "has" eternal life in the present tense (1 John 5:11, 12), whereas the "crown" refers to "life" Christians are to receive in a yet future sense. Evaluation: Eternal life is both, in a beautifully compatible relationship. It is a gift now and always (Rom 6:23), and it is, in its future, ultimate aspect, also the goal or outcome to which a life of sanctification moves (Rom 6:22; Gal 6:8), a life lived "for my sake" (Matt 19:29). Only those who genuinely do receive eternal life as a gift now will share in eternal life in its crowning realization at the Lord's appearing. And they are the people who now live a life with fruit to God in some real degree, a life which answers to the marks of genuineness that keep cropping up in 1 John (2:3, 4, etc.).

As to *merit*, eternal life is always a gift absolutely dependent only on the work of Christ. As to *manifestation*, the quality that is eternal life is expressed now and also is the final goal, outcome, or reward related to the reality of faith which lives the quality of life out into good works. These works are fruit of the eternal life genuinely already within (Rom 6:22). They are not *conditions* that merit eternal

inherit in a greater, more special sense as *co-heirs with Christ* in Rom 8:16, 17 and 2 Tim 2:12 (*Gospel Under Siege*, 109–11). This idea melts when one sees that suffering with Christ affects *all* the saved in some degree and form in Rom 8:16, 17; 2 Cor 1:5; 2 Tim 2:11; 1 Pet 4:12, 13. John Murray says: "'Joint-heirs with Christ' is not a loftier conception than 'heirs of God' but it gives concrete expression and elucidation to what is involved in being 'heirs of God'" (NICNT *The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968], 1.298–99). C. E. B. Cranfield says that "... συγκαληρονόμοι δὲ χριστοῦ expresses the certainty of our hope. Our sonship and our heirship rest on our relation to Him, on His having claimed us for His own. But he has already entered upon the inheritance for which we have still to wait, and this fact is the guarantee that we too, who are His joint-heirs, will enjoy the fulfilment of our expectations" (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, [2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975], 1.407). All the saved in the New Jerusalem reign with God and His Son (Rev 22:5; cf. the *throne of God* and of the *Lamb* in v 3). Biblically-validated thinking is that every son of God (= every saved person) is an heir, the one legitimate kind of heir of which the Bible speaks (Gal 4:7; Heb 11:7). Heirship links with grace (1 Pet 3:7), promise (Gal 3:29), and forgiveness of all the saved (Acts 26:18; Eph 1:7, 11). Saved Jews and Gentiles are fellow-heirs (Eph 3:6). Heirs are all the sanctified (Acts 20:32), and without sanctification *no man* will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). Everyone effectually called under the New Covenant is to receive the eternal inheritance (Heb 9:15), based on Christ's blood (vv 12, 14). All the saved will obtain the *imperishable* inheritance (1 Pet 1:4), which links easily with the *unfading* crown of glory (5:4). So Christ even speaks of inheriting eternal life (Matt 19:29; cf. Heb 1:14). Paul says that the ones who will not inherit the kingdom are the *unrighteous* (1 Cor 6:9f.), not a class of saved who are not so committed.

In view of biblical evidence rightly correlated, the overcomer/heir in Rev 21:7 is *any* saved person.



life but *characteristics* that manifest its presence. This is just as apples are not the conditions of the tree being an apple tree but the characteristics of the apple-tree nature. The blessings God gives to the overcomer as reward he does not tender with the understanding that the person has *merited* them in life's struggles or paid a price that *earns* them. Rev 21:6 shouts from the text that the water of life is "without cost" to the overcomer, though it cost God much. Yet this water of life is only one of various descriptions of blessedness celebrated in 21:3-6, and immediately v 7 relates God's *grace* and what it bestows with "the overcomer shall inherit these things." Contrary to any intrusion of the word "merit," what one receives for his overcoming—*all of it*—is "without cost!" So, we impose a distinction from our own errant logic that we cannot validly draw from the Bible if we imagine that we receive eternal life originally by faith through grace but receive the "crown of life" in the future because we *deserved* it on some order of merit-laden good works by faith. The process of the saved life is just as totally of grace as initial salvation (cf. 1 Cor 3:10a; 4:8; 15:10; Phil 2:12, 13). M'Neile rightly says from Matthew that "... since the opportunities for good actions are themselves a divine gift (xxv.14f.), service is a mere duty which cannot merit reward (Luke xvii.9f.)."<sup>18</sup> Reicke emphasizes that it is "God's due to require our obedience and readiness on account of the advance we have already received from him, and this is pure grace, without any merits on our side. . . ."<sup>19</sup> Preisker reasons that anything one can ever do that God will accept as a legitimate carrying out of his will must be done in "living power . . . given by God."<sup>20</sup>

#### PROMISES TO THE OVERCOMER FIT THE FAVORED VIEW

Several blessings Christ assures to the overcomer definitely will be applied to *all* the saved. Others also fit very reasonably. A mere selection of examples should show that this is true.

##### 1. Rev 2:7

When man sinned in Genesis 3 the Lord barred him from eating of the tree of life "lest he live forever." Christ promises the overcomer that he will eat of this tree in the future (Rev 22:2, 14, 19). Whether the eating is a memorial of living forever, or enjoying some blessed

<sup>18</sup>Alan M'Neile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1915), 55.

<sup>19</sup>Bo Reicke, "The New Testament Conception of Reward," in *Aux Sources de la Tradition Chrétienne. Mélanges offerts à Maurice Goguel*, ed. J. J. von Allmen (Paris, 1950), 197.

<sup>20</sup>H. Preisker, "μίσθός," *TDNT* 4 (1967) 718-19.

aspect of the eternal city that we do not yet understand, the blessing must be true of all the redeemed. In 22:14 it appears that all the genuinely saved partake. Why? First, the verse closely links access to the tree and admission into the New Jerusalem. God will admit all of the saved within the gates. If so, it is natural to assume that the other blessing as well is for all of the saved unless there is a compelling reason why it cannot be. Second, either of two readings in 22:14a fits very easily with the idea that all of the saved partake. Some manuscripts favor the wording, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have right to the tree. . . ." <sup>21</sup> This suits all the saved. When the Apocalypse refers to garments, it never refers to a group with unwashed or unclean robes receiving any of God's blessing. Those admitted into his presence are clad in washed garments (7:14); have not soiled their (spiritual) garments (3:4; 16:15); will walk with Christ in white linen (3:5; 7:9; 19:8).

Even another reading in 22:14 fits all the redeemed: "Blessed are those who do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree. . . ." This does not focus on the way they are saved, as if their doing runs up a score of merit. Rather it looks at their characteristic as the truly saved, the obedience that manifests the faith that takes God's gracious gift. It is like John 10:27, 28 where Jesus profiled his true sheep as those who "hear" and "follow" him. Both words, in the present tense, look at a continuing, overall pattern of commitment in faith lived out through faithfulness. Yet eternal life is God's *gift* (v 28)!

The Apocalypse consistently views those blessed in God's kingdom as people who kept his Word (1:3; <sup>22</sup> 12:17; 14:12; 22:7, 9). They

<sup>21</sup>The reading "those who wash their robes" (cf. 7:14, 1 Cor. 6:11) is favored by  $\kappa$ , A, ca. fifteen minuscules (1006, 2020, 2053, etc.), it, vg, cop, al. Another reading, "those who do his commandments," appears in the Textus Receptus, 046, most minuscules, it<sup>814</sup>, syr<sup>ph</sup>, h, cop<sup>bo</sup>, al. Bruce M. Metzger prefers the first reading, most notably because the Apocalypse elsewhere has τηρεῖν τὰς ἐντολάς (12:17; 14:12; also cf. τηρεῖν in 1:3; 22:7, 9), not ποιῶ τὰς ἐντολάς (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [New York: United Bible Societies, 1975], 765-66). (Ποιῶ in 1 John 5:2 is not enough to offset this pattern.)

<sup>22</sup>"Blessed" (1:3) occurs seven times in the book. Some blessings are of the nature that all the saved receive (19:9; 20:6; 22:7); others fit a pattern of references that apply to all the saved (1:3; 14:13, blessing for tribulation saints but applicable to all the saved; 22:14); then 16:15 refers to a tribulation saint who is spiritually alert, agreeing with exhortations to watch, wait, or look. These sometimes appear in contexts developing contrasts between people who are not prepared, who turn out to be unsaved, and people who are prepared, who turn out to be saved (Matt 24:37-51; 25:1-13; 25:14-30; Luke 12:35-48; 1 Thess 5:6). References to wait also fit this pattern (Luke 12:36; Gal 5:5; 1 Thess 1:10), as do other passages about waiting where the context favors application to all the saved (Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 1:7; 2 Thess 3:5). The same is true of verses about looking (Phil 3:20; Titus 2:13; Heb 9:28; 2 Pet 3:12, 13; Jude 21).

persevered in fidelity because of that Word (1:9; 6:9; 20:4). This harmonizes naturally with the line of biblical truth that keeping God's commandments is a hallmark of the saved.<sup>23</sup>

In 22:19, to be excluded from the tree sounds like being barred from a privilege any saved person is to enjoy. The person God denies is not a saved, albeit unfruitful person who misses special reward, set in contrast to a fruitful one who gains that reward. He is unsaved, regardless of his profession, so God distinguishes him from the saved.

## 2. Rev 2:11

The overcomer will not suffer "hurt" by the second death. This is a privilege of all the saved, whether or not they become martyrs, the peril that looms in this passage. Faithfulness in trials, even when martyrdom is not a result, leads to the crown of life, as James 1:12 shows. But the crown of *life* (positive) and avoiding the second *death* (negative) still have powerful relevance to any of the saved who face the imminent threat of sealing their testimonies with their blood. An example close at hand is "Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death among you" (v 13). Christ exhorts his people, when subjected to this extremity, to be faithful, inspired by his consolation here. After they have laid down their physical lives, God assures them the triumph of eternal, spiritual life; and they will not experience the ultimate death which is unutterably worse than physical death. They, with Paul, can exult that "death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor 15:54). And they can say, "O death, where is thy sting, O grave, where is thy victory?" (v 55).<sup>24</sup>

An effort to argue that *only some* of the saved are overcomers who gain this crown is based on the idea of being *hurt* or *injured* (ἀδικέω) by the second death. The logic is that a saved person who is not an overcomer can be *hurt* by this death in a sense which the saved man who is an overcomer eludes. Benedict supplies the example of a saved person in jeopardy of becoming a martyr at the hands of unsaved men who are destined for the second death. Should that believer recant and deny Christ, the second death would "hurt" him. In what sense? Benedict explains: "he would thus forfeit the crown of life, and be in that sense injured, hurt, or affected by the second death."<sup>25</sup> He holds that the person remains saved but loses out on gaining the special crown, a reward distinct from salvation.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Ps 37:34; 103:18; Ezek 18:9, 21; Dan 9:4 (a verse that links loving God with keeping his commandments, as Jesus does in John 14:15, 23; cf. also 1 John 2:3-6); Matt 19:17; Lk 8:15; 11:28; John 8:51; 15:10; 1 John 3:24; 5:2, 3; Rev 3:8, 10.

<sup>24</sup>The promise in Rev 2:10 is much like Jesus' reassurance in Matt 10:28-33. Note the similarity between "fear not" (v 28) and the phrase in Rev 2:10.

<sup>25</sup>Benedict, "The Use of *Nikaō*," pp. 14-15.

This does not have the ring of truth. When John uses ἀδικέω he always refers to inflicting direct, positive "injury" on some object (Rev 6:6, 7:2, 3; 9:4, 10, 19; 11:5). In the strained view above, the "injury" is not that of the death itself, directly, but in being prevented from receiving the crown of life, which is indirect. The problem with this is that wherever the second death elsewhere affects a person it affects him *directly, fully, eternally*. He is actually placed *in* it (20:6, 14). Also, the second death in Revelation 20 is a destiny absolutely opposite to eternal life (note the "book of life"), that life which is the privilege of all the saved. It is not death set in contrast to life thought of as a special, added reward for only a part of the redeemed, which is the meaning that Benedict proposes for the "crown of life."

Also, the genitive phrase linked with the crown in various passages is probably a genitive of apposition: "the crown which consists of [eternal] life," i.e., life in its final, consummative, fully-realized sense (James 1:12; Rev 2:10); "the crown which consists of [eternal] glory" (1 Pet 5:4); "the crown which consists of [ultimate] righteousness" (2 Tim 4:8).<sup>26</sup>

More persuasively, then, Rev 2:11 harmonizes with the concept that *every* saved person overcomes.

### 3. Rev 2:17

Christ promises hidden manna. The main views permit the manna to be a reward for *all* the saved. To Ladd it is a figure depicting admission to the Messianic feast, the Messiah's kingdom.<sup>27</sup> Others see the manna as a symbol for Christ, the bread of life, getting their cue from John 6:50f., 53–58.<sup>28</sup> If so, Christ is "hidden" in that we do not now see him (2 Cor 5:16; 1 Pet 1:8), but shall see him when he comes for his saints (1 John 3:1, 2). Such explanations go well with the idea that *every* saved person will be an overcomer and receive such a reward that Christ guarantees to the overcomer.

### 4. Rev 2:17

Any view of the "white stone" yet proposed has some difficulty for those who do not take the view proposed here. We cannot be dogmatic about what Christ meant, but if the "hidden manna" is a reward for every saved person the "white stone" in the same verse probably also is. From the background of Greek and Roman customs

<sup>26</sup>D. E. Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 98–99; Alexander Ross, *The Epistles of James and John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 32.

<sup>27</sup>George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 49.

<sup>28</sup>Stott, *What Christ Thinks*, 65.

arise such possible meanings for the stone as vindication, acceptance, identification, and honor as a victor. Any such idea suits *every* redeemed person.

Suppose, then, that eating the "hidden manna" is but another way of picturing what can also be represented as the joyous boon of feasting at the Messianic banquet (cf. Rev 19:9), experiencing the delights of the eternal kingdom. Just so, the "white stone" could represent a complementary idea—acceptance, identification with Christ, or honor in that kingdom (cf. Rom 2:7).

Even if the background for the stone is in *Israelite* custom, we can have a meaning that relates to every saint. Manna can picture God satisfying His people's needs in contrast to foods associated with false gods that do not satisfy lastingly (Rev. 2:14). One of the many possibilities for the point of reference for the white stone in Israelite history is plate stones on which God inscribed his moral will. This could be directly relevant in Revelation 2 to sins at Pergamum committed against God's moral standard (vv 14–23). As the overcomer received and honored the Word disclosing God's Person and will, Christ assures that he is to receive the ultimate disclosure of God's Person and will. His symbol for this is the "white stone."<sup>29</sup>

With either a Graeco-Roman or an Israelite background, then, the stone can portray a blessed reward possessed by *all* of the redeemed.

##### 5. Rev 2:26–27

Christ will give the overcomer authority over the nations, to help rule them with a rod of iron. Quite naturally the rule relates to every saved person.

In Rev 5:9, 10 all of the blood-bought of all nations are a kingdom and priests. They will reign on earth. In 20:4–6 all who

<sup>29</sup>Others think of the white stone as like the "Urim" fitted within the fold of the high priest's breastplate, in which were twelve stones (Exod 28:17ff.). Each stone was inscribed with the name of a tribe of Israel, and represented that tribe as present before the Lord in the bond of the covenant. In this view the "Urim" may have been a "white stone" or diamond on which God's secret name was written. It would symbolize a position of priestly prerogative before the Lord. If so, the promise suits *any* saved person, for all are priests (1 Pet 2:5; Rev 5:10). Stott leans to this position (*What Christ Thinks*, pp. 65–67). Moses Stuart proposed still other high priestly background for the stone ("The White Stone of the Apocalypse," *BSac* 1 (1843) 469–76). The white stone is a precious stone comparable to the gold band gracing the high priest's mitre with the words "Holiness to the Lord" (Exod 28:36ff.). Every overcomer, a priest, will bear the name of Christ the Lord, corresponding to the OT "Jehovah," which none but the high priest knew how to utter (p. 473). Stuart says the new name is the Logos (p. 476). His idea is consonant with every believer being an overcomer, but is not without problems. Christ says that it is a *white* stone, which does not correspond convincingly with a *gold* band; Christ says nothing of a headdress, etc.

belong to the "first resurrection"—to that classification of resurrection—reign with Christ for a thousand years.

All who have exercised the spiritual commitment of v 4 (loyalty to God's Word and to God rather than to the beast and his image) will no doubt share in the millennial reign. Other passages show that a general characteristic of the saved is that they keep the Word of God. This obedience is evidence that they truly love God.<sup>30</sup> And in the ultimate blessedness, *all* the saved reign eternally (22:5) as surely as they all enjoy other aspects described in 22:3-5.

In view of this it is reasonable that *all* the saved rule with Christ. We should not restrict this reward only to an elite, more faithful group among the saved.

To venture outside the Apocalypse for a moment, it is of interest to note that even in this life Paul expects *everyone* who has been justified to reign in life by Jesus Christ (Rom 5:17). He looks for faith's fruit with respect to sanctification to show up in every justified life (6:22f.; 7:4, 6). To him, the life of being led by the Spirit is God's norm for *all* (not some) of his authentic sons (8:14).

Suffering with Christ is an experience common in varying degrees and forms to *all* the saved, all who will someday be glorified (Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 4:17; 2 Tim 2:12).

Returning to the Apocalypse, authority over the nations is in terms of an iron-like rule over them. The psalmist predicts such rule for God's anointed One (Ps 2:9), and John envisions this as realized in Jesus Christ (Rev 12:5; 19:15). The primary focus of the ruling with a rod of iron seems to be on the authority demonstrated in subjugating the peoples. In comparison with Christ's strength, the nations are weak and fragile. He shatters them (cf. Exod 15:6b).

This primary idea seems correct for two reasons. First, the illustration in Rev 2:27b portrays *destruction*. Similarly, Jeremiah shattered a vessel into bits to illustrate what the Lord by his authority would do in judging Jerusalem in 587/86 B.C. (Jer 19:11). Second, Rev 19:15 locates this phrase, ruling with a rod of iron, in a context

<sup>30</sup>The truly saved love God (Exod 20:6; Ps 91:14; 97:10; 145:20; Matt 19:16-26; Rom 8:28; 1 Cor 2:9; 16:22; 1 Pet 1:7, 8; 1 John 4:7, 8, 12, 15, 16, 20). Keeping God's Word manifests love for him (John 14:21, 23-24; 1 John 5:2). It is not surprising, then, that Jesus can speak of keeping the commandments in the same breath with entering into life (Matt 19:17). Apparently he means that faith, which receives God's gift, expresses itself in fidelity to his Word, just as Paul speaks of faith that works through the channel of love (Gal 5:6). So, one enters into life and he avoids death by a proper response to the Word (John 8:51). And keeping the Word is involved when one fulfills aspects of God's will, such as in 1 Tim 1:19; 5:22; James 1:27; Jude 21.

<sup>31</sup>Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 471: ". . . its mention here is perhaps suggested by the former clause; the victor's share in the Messiah's conquest over his enemies may suggest the glory that is to follow."

of authoritative judgment at the second advent, prior to the description of Christ's millennial rule in chapter 20.

The idea that the saved will exercise dominion with Christ over the nations emerges in Rev 19:14. Armies of heaven accompany Christ at his second advent. These, arrayed in white, are conceivably the believers dressed in white linen earlier (v 8), angels (15:6), or all of these. They share in the Lord's iron-like, devastating victory over the beast and his armies. The believers in Christ's armies are "the bride," that is, the saints, not just saints allegedly victorious as distinguished from spiritually barren saints.

So, the reward which Christ pledges to the overcomer in Rev 2:26, 27 he will apparently provide for *all* of the redeemed.

#### 6. Rev 2:28

Christ will confer the morning star to overcomers. Many think this is a symbol of Christ, who will come shining with glory to inaugurate his kingdom (Matt 24:30; 25:31, 2 Thess 1:9). The star depicts the Messiah who has risen out of Jacob (Num 24:17). The fact that Christ styles himself "the bright morning star" in Rev 22:16 enhances this meaning. Just as the morning star is the harbinger of the dawn and shows that the full light of the day will soon brighten the earth, Christ in his coming will usher in the day of abundant Messianic glory (2 Pet 1:19). He will give himself as the "morning star" to the person who keeps his works (Rev 2:26), an idea in principle essentially like John 14:21. There, when a person obeys Christ's word, Christ manifests *himself* to him.

A similar view makes the star a symbol of believers' victorious glory in the future day.<sup>31</sup> The godly will shine as the stars (Dan 12:3); appear with Christ "in glory" (Col 3:4); be glorified with him (Rom 8:30; 2 Thess 1:9, 10). Good angels, too, are called "morning stars" (Job 38:7), because they can manifest bright glory (cf. Rev 18:1). Believers are also to shine brightly, whether as the stars or the sun (Matt 13:43; cf. 4 Ezra 7:97).<sup>32</sup>

In either view above or in the two combined, *all* saints will share the reward which the morning star portrays. It is arbitrary to restrict this reward to certain of the saved, as if only they overcome, and deny it to others as though they do not overcome.

<sup>31</sup>Believers are to shine as stars not only in Dan 12:3 but in the Pseudepigrapha: 1 Enoch 104:2; 4 Ezra 7:97, their faces are to shine as the sun and they are to be made like the light of the stars; v 125; cf. also 1 Enoch 62:15, 16, the righteous shall be arrayed in garments of glory and life; 2 Bar 50:1-4; 51:3, 10.

7. *Rev 3:5*

Christ will clothe the overcomer in white garments. The Apocalypse describes *all* the saved as finally arrayed in white. The blessing is for all who are part of the "bride," not confined only to the more fruitful (19:8). The martyrs taken to heaven appear in white (6:11a). These have overcome, as shown by faithfulness to the Word and their testimony (v 9). In the perspective of the book, the only ones eligible for the overcomer's blessing from the Lord are those who have been true to him. The burden of proof is on the interpreter who imagines that some who are truly saved are not faithful, that they do not have some degree of godly victory in the overall trend of their lives since they were initially saved.

In a passage about saved people during the tribulation (7:9ff.), it is said that they "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb." *All* are cleansed by the blood. And so, apparently, whether the saved during the tribulation suffer as martyrs or survive while maintaining spiritual integrity, all alike have washed their robes in the blood.<sup>33</sup> And the blessings they enjoy (vv 15–17) are of the nature that *all* the saints receive. They are in God's presence (cf. John 17:24), serving him (cf. Rev 22:3), no longer suffering from hunger, thirst, etc. (cf. 21:4).

The overcomer in 3:5 is one of those in v 4 "who have not soiled their garments." This pictures keeping their spiritual lives clean in a walk with the Lord (cf. James 1:27). It is similar to "the righteous acts of the saints" in 19:8. All true saints have these righteous acts (cf. 1 John 3:4–10), and fittingly God will commemorate this with a heavenly dress, whatever it finally means.

The saints' ultimate worship in principle answers to the call to "Worship the Lord in holy attire [in the splendor of holiness]" (Ps 96:9). God constitutes all the saints priests before him (1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 5:9, 10), so his principle is to array them consistently with his own decorum for priests: "Let thy priests be clothed with righteousness" (Ps 132:9a; cf. v 16; Isa 61:10). Two words in Psalm 132 apparently are interchangeable—righteousness and salvation<sup>34</sup>—since

<sup>33</sup>Rev 7:4–8 most naturally speaks of literal, saved Jews and 7:9ff. expands to the saved of all nations; 7:9ff. depicts blessings beyond this life that even saved Jews will receive. Indeed, 7:16–18 sounds like the spiritual boon God promised Israelites in Isa 49:10, which in principle expands also to the saved of all nations.

<sup>34</sup>And so the reward in its general sense is the crown which consists of eternal life (James 1:12; Rev 2:10); which consists of eternal glory (1 Pet 5:4); which consists of righteousness in its ultimate sense (2 Tim 4:8). All of the saved will belong to a sphere that features these realities.



the second part of both vv 9 and 16 is the same. But God who garbs the righteous will also clothe his enemies—with shame (v 18)!

In Rev 3:5, then, the overcomer is any saved person.

Another aspect in 3:5 is Christ's promise to the overcomer: "I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels." Benedict says that passages about Christ confessing or not confessing men contrast two categories among the saved. They are "promises of reward or loss of reward for *discipleship*,"<sup>35</sup> assuming a system in which really committed believers are disciples and other saved people are not. But the evidence actually supports a different distinction: Christ will confess all the *saved* but deny the *unsaved*.

Evidence for relating the last part of 3:5 to all the truly saved is as follows. First, Luke 9:26 makes it clear that a person's salvation is very doubtful if he can be described as ashamed of Christ and his words. The biblical pattern says that the saved keep Christ's words or some wording to the same basic effect.<sup>36</sup> Second, in Luke 9:24, 25, salvation appears to be involved in Christ's words: "... whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it." Only Christ finally can save, to be sure, but men save themselves in that they heed the invitation to salvation and then see that they go on with Christ (Acts 2:40; 1 Tim 4:16). Luke 9:25 probably refers to failure to gain salvation when it says, "For what is a man profited, if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?" Third, the term "denied" in Luke 12:9 more naturally fits with the view that Christ will not regard such a person as saved: "but he who denies me before men shall be denied before the angels of God." Fourth, confessing Christ is definitely related to genuine faith and salvation in Rom 10:9, 10. Since this passage clearly casts confession of Christ in the context of relationship, the probability is strong that in the other texts as well the person who confesses Christ is saved and the person who denies him is not. The contrast is not between a spiritual Christian who confesses him and a carnal Christian who does not. Fifth, while the meaning of 2 Tim 2:12 is not in itself unequivocal, to deny Christ most probably refers to the unbelief that springs from an unsaved mind-set. Christ denying a person probably means that he rejects him at the future judgment. This is evidently the case, since v 11 is no doubt dealing with a person really saved as distinguished from one who is not. The saved person indeed has died with Christ and will live with him! Further, to endure (v 12) is a mark of the redeemed person. And it has already been pointed out that all of the saved will reign with Christ (Rev 22:5).

<sup>35</sup>Benedict, "The Use of *Nikaō*," 33-34.

<sup>36</sup>Cf. nn. 23, 30.

The evidence, then, supports the conviction that in Rev 3:5 the overcomer Christ confesses is any saved person. The man Christ will deny is not a saved man who is unfruitful; he is the unsaved man, even if a professing church member!

Another relevant problem in Rev 3:5 is Christ's promise not to remove the overcomer from the "book of life." Those who believe that saved men may lose salvation (view 1 above) connect the idea of removal with this loss.<sup>37</sup> Others suppose God records all men in the "book," but removes those who fail to become saved.<sup>38</sup> A preferable view is that Christ records *only the saved*<sup>39</sup> and promises never to remove them. Reasons supporting his preservation of these follow.

(1) He makes no direct statement that he will delete a name once it is in the book. That he implies the possibility is not certain enough to be the basis for a view. Even what seems to some to be implied can be explained from the standpoint of a contrast between a human, earthly, public register from which men remove names after physical death and God's book from which names are not scratched. Christ's point is that the insecurity that men know prevails in this world will not happen with regard to this spiritual book. An analogy is 2:10, 11. A Christian can face *physical* death, but assuredly will never suffer the *second* death. Christ pledges his security. In 3:12, one can go out of a present, earthly temple, but the overcomer will *not* go out of the spiritual, eternal temple of God. Christ pledges his security.

Similarly, the OT has registers of names in this life (Ezek 13:9; Exod 32:32, 33; Isa 4:1, 2; Jer 22:30). These are lists on this earth among men (or Exodus 32: *God's* list of the physically living) which keep a person's name until he dies; then his name is scratched out as no longer pertinent. In Ps 9:5 God has blotted out names of the wicked in destroying them physically from this life. Ps 69:28 can be understood in different ways. It may refer to *God's* awareness of those physically alive; *human* records of the living (Dan 12:1?); a

<sup>37</sup>Cf. nn. 1, 2.

<sup>38</sup>Strauss, *Book of Revelation*, 120; Walvoord, *Revelation*, 82-83.

<sup>39</sup>That *only* the saved are ever listed in the "Book of Life" is proved by various factors. (1) Some passages speak of being written in heaven (Luke 10:20; Heb 12:23), a unique privilege of the saved. (2) Other texts speak not of being written in heaven, but being in the book of life. These, too, convey the strong impression that only the saved are so recorded (Phil 4:3; Rev 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). No one unsaved is ever directly said to be in this book *now*, to *have been removed*, or to *have once been* in it but not so now. (3) Some references speak of unsaved as not written in the book. They do not hint that they were *ever* in it (Rev 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15); the unsaved are shown not to be listed here; it seems to be eisegesis to suggest that they were *in* it but *later removed* when they failed to receive Christ. The texts do not say or intimate this. In Rev 21:27, only those *in* the book may enter the New Jerusalem; it does not refer to those who *remain in* the book, as if they once were in it but did not continue.

*human* list of the unrighteous who die and God's list of the godly (Dan 12:1?) from which he withholds the unrighteous; or *God's* book from which he blots out unsaved but retains the godly.<sup>40</sup> Only in the NT do references appear that unequivocally mean a "book" of God pertaining to eternal life.

(2) The promise embraces every "overcomer," admitting of no exceptions. Every person who believes with true faith and has been born again is an overcomer (1 John 5:1, 4, 5). So, if every born again person is an overcomer, and no overcomer will be blotted out of the book, no born again person can be removed.

(3) The phrase immediately linked with the book, "I will confess his name," is Christ's promise that he will be loyal to all the truly saved as in other NT teaching already discussed.

(4) Johannine passages teach that God keeps securely all those truly saved (John 6:37-41, 54 with 56; 10:27-29, 1John 5:18).

(5) Rev 3:5 agrees with a scriptural pattern which immediately links a positive promise with a negative promise to teach a truth even more emphatically (John 5:24, 10:28, 29, etc.). The negative aspect does not drape a shroud of doubt over the saved man's security; it erects a further pillar of support against a further consideration.

#### CONCLUSION

1. All of the saved are overcomers according to biblical terminology and exegesis.

2. Reward promised to the overcomer in Revelation 2-3 fits very well with the conclusion that all the saved will receive such reward. The distinction between two categories of the saved will not be that one receives the reward and another falls short of it. Rather, both receive it, yet each in that distinguishable degree, position, capacity, or role that befits his case as God sees it. Both enjoy in common the fully satisfying sphere of reward in general depicted by various terms, e.g., the kingdom, eternal life, glory, inheritance, etc. And both enjoy in common the blessing that such a promise as hidden manna or the white stone picture. Yet with that general blessedness that God bestows on all the saved, each has reward in a more particular sense in that degree, position, capacity or role of fellowship in holy service (Rev 22:3) that suits his case.

<sup>40</sup>This last opinion is not probable in view of clearer, more direct NT statements (cf. n. 39).