

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God's Message to Seven Churches: Thyatira: Blessed Overcoming

And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches. (Revelation 2:26–29, KJV 1900)

Scripture consistently reminds us that faithfulness in our service to the Lord brings incredible blessings, while failure to stand faithful withholds those blessings. We have explored the Biblical teaching that God rules this world as its Moral Governor, not as its cosmic puppeteer, manipulating people and events at will, and orchestrating the strings according to some unknown and secret plan. God indeed does on occasion intervene on behalf of His beloved children in their hours of need, and He does so powerfully, but Scripture does not teach that God actively manipulates every event that occurs. Defenders of the cosmic puppeteer view occasionally appeal to a non-contextual interpretation of Romans 8:28 as a supposed defense of their view. Although Paul uses the term "...all things..." just four short verses later in the context, he uses the same exact term and there clearly defines those "...all things..." that always work together for good to those who love God.

He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? (Romans 8:32, KJV 1900)

If we can prove that something in our lives occurred specifically through the death and sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ, we can live with the certain conviction that it works for our good. However, the diabolical workings of Satan, and even our own rebellious sins, do not work together, much less for our good. Beyond this context, Scripture repeatedly rejects the all-inclusive idea that everything eventually works for our good. For example, in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16, Paul lists several things that cannot—and do not—work together, much less for the good of the Lord's children.

We live under God's righteous moral government, and, in this position, we live under His fixed commandments to obey Him and to follow His Law, not our own ways. He does not coerce our obedience, nor does He force our disobedience in some diabolical scheme. We choose to obey, or we choose to disobey, and we face the blessings or the

consequences of our choices. Scripture is quite consistent in this teaching.

We see this consistency in our study verses. The believer who overcomes his/her own sinful inclinations, as well as the ever-present Jezebel influence to compromise faith and confuse God's teachings, is promised an incredible blessing. Do not overlook the words of the passage, "...that overcometh, and keepeth **my works** unto the end...." God knows the difference between actual obedience from the heart and lip-service that says the right things, but departs in behavior. And this required consistency does not accept an occasional act of obedience, or even a brief season. It requires that we keep His works "...unto the end...." We've studied a similar term in letters to the other churches, "Be thou faithful unto death...."

...to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. How does an overcoming, faithful believer discover this power over the nations? How does he/she rule them with a rod of iron? Are we to anticipate at some future time a world-wide Christian theocracy? Some Christians believe that such a time shall come. However, should it come, believers who live at that time would benefit, but the faithful overcoming believers at Thyatira who died in their persecutions long centuries before would not benefit. The verse says too much to find fulfillment in a long-future and highly uncertain philosophical view of Scripture. If you had lived in John's day and had been a member of the church in Thyatira, you would read these words and fully expect something in your lifetime. Further, how would a distant future theocracy break the persecuting powers of first century Thyatira to shivers with a rod of iron?

Through the history of Christianity, occasional events have at times witnessed the incredible power of the faith to transform a whole culture. At times in the early centuries, the Roman Empire seemed devoted to eliminating the Christian faith, but, in the end, the faith survived, and Rome disintegrated. The French philosopher Descartes invested his life's energies in rather hostile actions against traditional Christianity. Depending on the

source, he is viewed as either a deist or as an outright atheist. However, not long after Descartes' death, one of his primary residences was purchased and converted into a Bible publishing house.

...even as I received of my Father. Jesus promises His followers a victory similar to the victory that He received of His Father. While the unbelieving world views Jesus' crucifixion as His crowning defeat, Scripture consistently depicts it as His moment of crowning victory. Three short days after His death, Jesus broke the seal, rolled away the stone, weighing possibly several tons, and left the tomb empty and defeated. No local governor could stop Him. No empire could confine Him. The triumphal praise of His followers declares the truth that supports our study passage.

And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. (Revelation 19:6 KJV)

Lest we compromise the point of this lesson, consider Paul's words, as well.

Which in his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; (1 Timothy 6:15 KJV)

He now "...reigneth." His revelation, "shew," shall be future, but the fact of His dominion is a present reality. He now "...*is* the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords."

If we view our faith as a mere philosophy for life with no further implications, the points of our study passage either have no meaning, or we must nudge them to some future and imagined era. If we regard our faith as a timeless revelation of God to His people, we readily incorporate the future, even our future after death, as altogether real.

When we face our darkest hour, we wonder about the outcome. The darkness has an insidious way of closing in around us and invading our own thinking. Our sole defense against this darkness is to keep our hearts focused on the light. Notice the next point that appears in our study passage.

And I will give him the morning star. We often hear the expression that the darkest hour is the hour just before dawn. Ancient cultures observed that the planet Venus appears brightly in the eastern sky shortly before sunrise. It took on the symbol of assurance that night was over, and daylight would soon come.

To the faithful in Thyatira, this promise would not indicate that all their troubles were over, or that the ideal world was soon to come. It would serve to remind them that their present distress, however dark and frightening, would soon end. Perhaps it would end in their death and their immediate entrance into glory. Perhaps it would end by the

death of the persecuting Domitian and his forces. The appearance of the morning star did not reveal how the night would end, but that it soon would end. Jesus' assignment involved crucifixion, but it was followed by resurrection and glory. Why should His followers think that their struggle would end differently from their Lord's?

The evil, unbelieving world would view the death of a Christian as its personal victory, and as certain defeat for the Christian. However, for the faithful Christian who knows the truth of Scripture, death is not at all the moment of defeat, but the beginning of glorious victory.

For I know that this shall turn to my salvation through your prayer, and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death. (Philippians 1:19-20 KJV)

We need this powerful reminder of life's priorities, as God prioritizes. Paul's primary objective was neither to fight for life as his ultimate objective, nor was it to commit suicide to gain a quick exit from his trials. His whole aim was that, live or die, he would magnify the Lord Jesus Christ, whether he magnified the Lord in his life of devoted and loving service, or by dying for his faith at the hands of his persecutors. His one life-consuming goal was to magnify the Lord Jesus Christ.

This study raises an interesting question. What does it mean to "Overcome"? Does it mean that we become super-Christians who rise to near-sinless perfection? That would be nice, but it is not realistic, or Biblical for that matter. Does it mean that we become super-critical Christians, the vocal, ready critic of anyone whose behavior violates our idea of right? That attitude most often accompanies utter defeat, not overcoming. I suggest that Biblical overcoming must begin with our own personal attitudes and behaviors, not on how forcefully we impose our faith on others. For the persecuted and suffering saints at Thyatira, overcoming very likely required them to face the distinct possibility that they would lose their lives for their faith, so they must overcome their fear of their own mortality, their fear of death. (Hebrews 2:14-15)

Perhaps the single most difficult attainment for a believer is to overcome self. For the preacher, it is to learn, faithfully and consistently, to "...preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." (2 Corinthians 4:5) For every believer, it is that supreme step of self-denial. (Matthew 16:14; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23) When we truly reach this state of self-denial and settle into the faithful and fixed outlook of magnifying the Lord Jesus Christ, whether in life or in death, we have finally overcome. Praise the Lord.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor