

Christ, our overcomer

Revelation 1:9-20

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The book of Revelation is known for being hard to understand, but there are some basic truths that are very clear. One recurring theme in the book of Revelation centers around the word *"nikao"*. This is the word from which comes the name of the athletic shoe company, Nike. It means to triumph, to conquer, to prevail and to overcome. This word appears 28 times in the New Testament. 17 of those are in the book of Revelation. This is truly a book for those who need to overcome.

"He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life" (Revelation 3:5). "He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations" (Revelation 2:26). "He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne" (Revelation 3:21). "He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death" (Revelation 2:11). "He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God" (Revelation 3:12). "To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7). "He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son" (Revelation 21:7).

The book of Revelation is a book of overcoming, and when we look back at their time in history, the Christians definitely were needing to overcome all that was coming against them.

The book of Revelation was written around 96 A.D. By this time, most of the apostles and early Christians had died. Many had been martyred. Across the Roman Empire Christianity was seen as a despised superstition that worshiped a crucified criminal. They were hated because they would not worship the emperor or submit to him as their ultimate authority. They observed the Lord's Supper, that sounded like cannibalism to the outsiders. They were seen as atheists, because they rejected the many Roman gods, and their God was invisible, not an idol. In that day many believed that natural disasters occurred when the people neglected the pagan gods. Christians could be blamed for this as well.

In 64 A.D., Emperor Nero brought the first official persecution against the Christians in order to pass off the blame of the great fire in Rome. In 70 A.D., Jerusalem and the temple had been totally destroyed by the Romans. Hundreds of thousands of people had been killed. 25 years later, Emperor Domitian instituted an even more widespread persecution against the Christians that stretched even to Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey.

That is the situation when this vision of Christ comes to John.

Asia Minor is where these seven churches, that we are starting to consider, were located. In the midst of their difficulties, most of these churches were not overcoming. Instead, they were being overcome . . . by sin, heresy, fear, and a loss of their love for Christ. The whole situation was grim, but that is where Christ came to meet them.

In Revelation 1:9, we find these words:

“I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”

John was one of the inner circle of three of Jesus’ 12 apostles. He was the writer of a gospel and three letters in the New Testament. He was a leader in the early church, but yet he humbly identifies himself as merely a brother and a partner of the same tribulation, belonging to the same kingdom, and desperately in need of the same patient endurance that could only be found in Christ Jesus.

This truth was not unique to John. In Acts 14:22, Paul wrote: ***“Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”*** In 2 Timothy 2:12, we read: ***“If we endure, we shall also reign with him.”*** In Matthew 24:13, Jesus said: ***“He who endures to the end will be saved.”*** It is in Christ that we find the patient endurance that will be required for us to overcome.

As we already discussed, the Christians of this time in history had much to be discouraged about, and John even more so. He was around 90 years of age, an old man by that day’s standards. Because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, he had been exiled to the small, barren Island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, off the coast of modern day Turkey. It was 16 kilometers long and only 8 kilometers wide.

History accounts that during the time of the Roman empire, when prisoners were banished to islands such as this, it would include a loss of all property, all possessions, and all civil rights. The prisoners often were condemned to hard labor, working in the quarries or mines, cutting rock. Historian Sir William Ramsay adds that John’s banishment likely included scourging, wearing chains, insufficient food, sleeping on the ground, and work under the constant threat of a whip across the back. Jerome, the Christian scholar and translator from the 4th century, wrote that John was banished in the fourteenth year after Nero and liberated on the death of Domitian.¹

¹ *Concerning Illustrious Men*, 9

Thinking back to those days with Jesus, when they had sat and talked about the kingdom and Christ's return, John had probably imagined much more than this, but here he was. Faithfully serving his Lord in the worst of circumstances.

¹⁰I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

This first phrase, ***"I was in the Spirit"*** was likely some sort of spiritual state that came over him and heightened his awareness of and his experience with the Holy Spirit. It does not clearly explain what occurred, but believers tell of times when God's Word seemed to come alive to them, or the conviction of sin came upon them in an overwhelming manner, or how they sensed the presence of God as they prayed or as they worshipped. In some way, John was experiencing the Holy Spirit in a heightened way.

It was on the Lord's Day. It was customary for the Christians to worship on the first day of the week instead of the traditional *sabbath* of Saturday. This change was primarily commemorating Christ's resurrection on the first day of the week.

As John was worshipping in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, he heard a loud voice like a trumpet. It does not say he heard a trumpet. He heard a voice like a trumpet. This voice of Christ must have been loud, piercing and heard in such a way that it could not be ignored. It demanded one's attention.

This voice instructed John to write down in a book everything that he would see and to send it to the seven churches. These were literal churches, and the cities in which they were listed followed the postal route across Asia Minor. The route began with Ephesus and finished at Laodicea.

¹²Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.

We now begin with the vision that John sees. To best understand the symbolism of this chapter and the rest of the book of Revelation we must view it in light of the Old Testament. The book of Revelation has over 500 references to the Old Testament.

John turned to see the voice that was speaking to him and there before him was one like the son of man, standing in the midst of seven lampstands.

John describes ***"one like a son of man"***. This is a reference back to Daniel 7:13. In this verse, the "son of man" is described as coming before the Ancient of Days: ***"To the son of man was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away."*** This son of man was a description of Christ, and as we see Christ's use of the term we see that it becomes synonymous with the title of Messiah.

In this vision Jesus is wearing a long robe with a golden sash around his chest. Robes were often used by royalty and prophets, but this word for robe, translated from the Old Testament, was most often used for the robe worn by the high priest. While Christ is pictured in scripture as prophet and king, in this vision it is a clear picture of Christ coming as our high priest. The gold sash around His chest in this vision was also worn by the high priest in the Old Testament.

The book of Hebrews uses this same imagery when talking of Christ as our great high priest.

Hebrews 2:17-18 and 4:15 say: ***“Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (...) For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”***

This is the picture of our Christ who overcomes. In the midst of the pain of John’s day and the struggles in the churches, Jesus could have presented Himself in many ways, but He didn’t. He presented Himself as their high priest. The one who invites them to come before His throne with confidence in their time of need and receive grace and mercy. The one who had known the sufferings of man and now was able to empathize fully with His people.

John goes on to describe:

***¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire,
¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters.***

In Jesus John saw purity, timelessness, purifying fire, and the authority of God.

¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

As John continued to describe what he saw, he told of ***“a sharp two-edged sword”***. It reminds us of the words in Hebrews 4:12: ***“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword.”*** In Revelation 2:16, Jesus even warns the church of Pergamum, ***“Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.”*** It was a sword of discipline and judgment.

John then continues with the description of the face of Christ, like the sun shining in full strength, brilliant, inextinguishable, and illuminated and revealing all.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last,¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

The vision is so overpowering and shocking that John collapses like a dead man. We see a similar response from Isaiah and Ezekiel in the Old Testament. Such fear was normal when those in scripture experienced visions from God.

In response Jesus reaches out and touches him and says, *"Fear not."* It might have brought back memories of John's Mount of Transfiguration experience in Matthew 17:7. He, James and Peter had been with Christ and heard God's voice coming from a cloud. They had fallen on their faces and were terrified. *"But Jesus came and touched them, saying, rise and have no fear."* We see again this picture of Immanuel, God with us, the God who draws near.

Jesus instructs John to "fear not" and then gives the reason why. When Jesus used the words *"I am"* he was starting out with the name of God from Exodus 3:14. He then refers to Himself as *"the first and the last"*. This, too, is a divine designation from the Old Testament. It is the idea of everlasting to everlasting, timelessness, when all the false gods have come and gone He will still remain.

He is the *"living one"*. This, too, is a divine description from the Old Testament (Joshua 3:10; Psalms 42:2; Hosea 1:10). *"I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."*

We must bring all of these pieces together. Jesus is using divine titles to describe Himself. He is declaring Himself as God. There is not question. There is no other. Yes, He died, but He is now alive! He now has authority over all things, including even death and the grave . . . and He, the Sovereign Lord, has come for us.

As we understand the greatness of God, the nearness of God and the faithfulness of God, we begin to grasp the truth that in any situation we can overcome. Because we are His, we have everything we need to face the struggles of today and the tribulations that might await us in the future.

Discussion Questions:

1. What in this sermon do you find most meaningful?
2. In your own words, summarize the difficulties facing the Christians in John's day.
3. Can you describe a time in life when you were about to be overcome by your life situation?
4. How would you summarize the idea of "the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance being in Jesus"?
5. Jesus is our high priest, how should that encourage us in the midst of tribulation?
6. What do you think God wants you to remember from this sermon?
7. How can we pray for you?