

IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING BIBLE WORD PICTURES

Track 10 – Lining Up the Word Pictures in Revelation 2 and 3

Introduction/Relevance

In our final time together, let's look at how the Bible uses "multiples" to try to help us understand the meaning. I can think of no better example than the final book of the Bible. Revelation 2 and 3 contain the 7 letters delivered by messengers to the 7 churches prior to the Tribulation. While the letters are often treated separately, they are all best studied *as a group or series* for at least a couple of reasons:

- Each letter ends with "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the *churches*." Notice that all 7 letters end with the plural *churches*. While each church receives some individual attention, they are *all* meant to hear ALL the letters (as well as the rest of the story told in Revelation).
- Only when the letters are *tied together* do you see the full picture that Jesus is trying to communicate, and He does so on several levels (as we see often in Revelation). This will be more fully explained below.

While most of the parts of each letter are easy to explain once you know the historical context of each city, one part of each letter has created an issue for interpreters. The phrase "the one who overcomes", near the end of each letter, has created disputes because of its interpretation. Most theologies (Catholic, Reformed and Arminian included) interpret the phrase as though overcoming is a matter of *continual perseverance*. As a result, interpreters argue that the churches may or may not receive the blessing or curse, depending on whether or not they "overcome". My purpose here is not to look thoroughly at each of the letters,¹ but to consider what Jesus meant in His reference to "the one who overcomes." But before we talk about the "problematic" part, let's look at the common form of all seven.

The Common Form of the letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3

The letters follow the form of an *imperial edict* in ancient times, and have some common elements with Old Testament covenant forms,² so would have been familiar to both Jews and Greeks. In both cases, they exemplify a message *from a King*, in this case God the Son, to His citizens. And their form makes great sense here in Revelation, since the whole book is about the Coming King! Here are the 7 common elements:

1. Church (addressed to believers)
2. City (Destination)
3. Critic/Caesar/Christ (Author's Self-Description)
4. Commendation(s) - (the "+s")
5. Criticism(s) – (the "-s")
6. Correction(s) (Exhortation)
7. Citizen Encouragement/Close (to "the Overcomer")

¹ If you would like to read more about each of the churches, there are several good resources that should be easy to find, including John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1966.

² ...echoes the Old Testament formula that prophets of God borrowed from *royal edicts* and typical messenger formulas: "Thus says the lord/king." Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Second Edition. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014. Revelation 2:1 note.

While I have seen different “parts” lists from different writers, this list of parts will help us see the structure and the importance of the *last part*. Due to the interpretation of “the one who overcomes”, many theology students simply blend it into the “Correction/ Exhortation” part of each letter. But is that the best way to understand the phrase “the one who overcomes”? Those who argue that the “overcomer” statements are conditional usually do some mental gymnastics around at least a couple of the promises. In Revelation 2:11, John writes, “He who overcomes will not be harmed by the second death.” So, some Christians might be harmed by the second death? What does *that* mean? Another example is in Revelation 3:5: “He who overcomes...I will not blot his name out of the Book of Life.” Might some believers arrive in heaven simply to have their names blotted out?! Independent of a person’s theology, if “overcoming” is understood to be “persevering,” our interpretation of the seven occurrences will not be so easy. If our interpretation is correct, it will line up all seven occurrences and be consistent. I would also say that if correct, our interpretation will also make the passages easier to understand... I will argue that the seven “overcoming” sections are promises made to all believers.³ I will do so based on three main arguments.

John’s Consistent Use of “Overcomer” Points the Believer’s Identity

Those who argue that “to overcome” is conditioned on perseverance usually say that, while the Apostle John *clearly* used “overcome” as a synonym for faith in Christ (true for all believers!), *Revelation is “different.”* They argue that because Revelation is prophetic, it should be understood differently. The 7 letters, however, were written to address present concerns, *just like the other letters in the New Testament*, and those 7 letters are not part of the tribulation account. The vast majority of uses the Greek word “overcome” in its verbal and participial forms (for those who can appreciate the grammar)⁴ come from the Apostle John, and he *ONLY* uses it in 1st John and Revelation. In line with how we view an “overcomer” or “victor” as someone has *already won*, take a look at the passages in 1st John where the Apostle uses the word:

- **1 John 2:13-14:** I write to you, fathers, Because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, Because you *have overcome* (νενικήκατε) the wicked one. I write to you, little children, Because you have known the Father. I have written to you, fathers, Because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, Because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, And you *have overcome* (νενικήκατε) the wicked one.
- **1 John 4:4:** You are of God, little children, and *have overcome* (νενικήκατε) them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.
- **1 John 5:4-5:** For whatever is born of God *overcomes* (νικᾷ) the world. And this is the *victory* (νίκη) that *has overcome* (νικήσασα) the world—our faith. Who is **he who overcomes** (ὁ νικῶν) the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

³ For a much more thorough study of the issue of “the one who overcomes” by some who share my conclusions, you can see Dennis Rokser, Tom Stegall and Kurt Witzig, “Who is the Overcomer in Revelation 2-3?” in *Should Christians Fear the Outer Darkness?* Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2015. Pages 417-470.

⁴ As a note to students of Greek grammar: In contrast to the consistent use of *present indicatives and imperatives* in the Correction/Exhortation section in each letter, the Promises always begin with *substantival participles* (“the overcomer”, “to the overcomer”) and then add *future tense verbs* (“I will _____”). The clear shift in form in each case alone should be enough to demonstrate that the promise section is *distinct and different* from any other part of the letter. It is also interesting to note that the Apostle John uses substantival participles in all of his writings, and uses them much more than the other New Testament authors.

Notice John's focus on "overcoming" throughout his 1st letter. In each case, "overcoming" is a "done deal" *because of our faith*. Believers are overcomers because *Jesus overcame and we are in Him*. Why would we assume that Revelation 2 and 3 should be understood differently than 1st John when, if John is simply being consistent, understanding the word the same way *solves so many problems?! This seems to be an issue of theology determining interpretation* (in my opinion). Understanding the "overcomer" section as promises to all believers is consistent with a closing promise from a King to His citizens, which He then fulfills at the end of the story... As Keener notes, "Each of the promises in these oracles (letters) to the churches is fulfilled in Revelation 21–22.⁵ Ending each letter with a wonderful promise *also* points to His unmerited GRACE.

The Form of the Phrase "One Who Overcomes" Points to Identity, Not Activity

Most writers and teachers of the 7 church letters in Revelation argue that the reason that "overcoming" is conditional is because the word "overcome" is in the present tense. They then proceed to argue that the present tense indicates "ongoing, continuous action". While that is already a very narrow use of the present tense, one might be able to argue that position if we were talking about a verb... In each of the 7 letters, the phrase is actually made up of a definite article ("the") and a participle (like "jumping"). The problem for the original translators was (and still is!) how to capture the phrase adequately when English has no literal equivalent: "the jumping" ...what does that mean? While interpreters have wrestled with various answers like "the jumping one" or "the one who jumps," the phrase in Greek *is meant to use the participle as a noun*:

Mark 4:3 ἐξῆλθεν ὁ σπείρων σπεῖραι (The one who is sowing [i.e., *the sower*] went out to sow). Often *an article and participle can be transformed into a noun* rather than into a relative clause: ὁ κλέπτων (the thief), ὁ κρίνων (the judge). The *time frame of the participle is determined by contextual pointers*: Galatians 1:23 Ὁ διώκων ἡμᾶς ποτε νῦν εὐαγγελίζεται τὴν πίστιν (The one who *formerly persecuted* us is now proclaiming the faith).⁶

Because it's sometimes awkward in English to translate the phrase (article + participle) using a noun, translators have often used "the one who ..." But that moves the phrase back into verb territory, which seems to be what the theologians want to do with it! Participles in themselves, however, are not used to indicate time (they have a tense *form*, but not function):

The participle was timeless. Indeed, the participle in itself continued timeless, as is well shown by the articular participle. Thus in Mark 6:14, Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτίζων, it is not present time that is here given by this tense, but the *general description* of John as the Baptizer *without regard to time*. It is actually used of him after his death. Cf. οἱ ζητοῦντες (Mt. 2:20).⁷

⁵ Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Second Edition. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014. Print.

⁶ Young, Richard A. *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994. Print.

⁷ Robertson, A. T. *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*. Logos Bible Software, 2006. Print.

In order to give you a better idea of the way the noun phrase is translated, take a look at the following examples, taken from several places in the New Testament. In each case, the participle has an article and a present tense form:

Literal:	Traditional Translation:	Closer:	Best (Identity):
The Sowing ὁ σπείρων	The one who sows (Matthew 13:3)	The sowing one	The Sower
The Betraying ὁ παραδιδούς	The one who betrays (Matthew 27:3)	The betraying one	The Betrayer
The Judging ὁ κρίνων	The one who judges (John 8:49)	The judging one	The Judge
The Receiving ὁ λαμβάνων	The one who receives (Revelation 2:17)	The receiving one	The Recipient/Receiver
The Persecuting ὁ διώκων	The one who persecutes (Galatians 1:23)	The persecuting one	The Persecutor
The Coming ὁ ἐρχόμενος	The One who comes/arrives (John 11:27)	The coming One	The One who has come
The Believing ὁ πιστεύων	The one who believes (John 3:16, 1 John 5:1,5)	The believing one	The Believer
To the Non-Working τῷ μὴ ἐργαζομένῳ	The one who does not work (Romans 4:5)	The non-working one	The Non-Worker
The Overcoming ὁ νικῶν	The one who overcomes (1 st John 5, Rev. 2,3)	The overcoming one	The Overcomer/Victor

In each of these cases, does it seem like the focus is on a “continuous, persistent, present and consistent” action? Of course not! *How many times* did Judas betray Jesus in order to be labeled a “betraying one”? *How many times* will someone (in the future) receive a stone in order to be “the one who receives”? How many times did Jesus have to come into the world before He could fulfill the Old Testament prophecies concerning the “the coming One”? Should a believer *continually* “not work” in order to be counted as righteous? Was Paul *busy* persecuting believers when the statement was made about him? In each case, the consistency of the “action” should be determined by the context and what we know about the person involved. In most cases, there is an emphasis on the *identity* of the “one” involved. *If* repetition or continuity is involved, it is based on the person and the context. In each case, we need to ask the question, “Is this person *consistently, continually and presently* doing the action that is used to describe them?” Since the obvious answer in most cases is, “NO,” shouldn’t we choose to evaluate each situation based on the CONTEXT and how the author speaks about them based on their description?

Translating “the one who overcomes” as “the overcomer” in the letters to the 7 churches is consistent with treating the noun phrase *as a noun*. And once you translate all seven instances as “the overcomer,” it is much easier to see it as an *identity* issue, *not* an activity issue... Beyond that, translating the phrase as a noun makes it much easier to connect it to John’s usage of “the overcomer” in 1st John 5:5: “Who is *he who overcomes* (ὁ νικῶν) the world, but *he who believes* that Jesus is the Son of God? In other words, *every believer is an overcomer*.”

While the phrase is most often translated “the one who overcomes” or “to the one who overcomes,” in each case the Greek word is functioning as a noun, and would point to a present identity, not necessarily present action. A better translation would be “the overcomer,” “the victor,” “the winner” or “the conqueror” (all valid translations of the word). When we think of people to whom we apply those titles, aren’t we typically speaking about *who they are* because of something that was *already done*?

The Simple Answer, based on John’s usage, is the best answer, and solves all the problems...

When we are allowed to see John’s use of “the overcomer” in 1st John as consistent with its use in Revelation 2 and 3, keeping it simple,⁸ it makes most of the letters much easier to understand. And you don’t have to try to “make them fit” your theology! Beyond that, we will see that the structure of the letters has more purpose than we may have thought.

Take, for example, the section of each letter concerning Christ’s *self-identification*. While Christ’s description of Himself in each of these 7 letters is specific to each church, it is extremely important to recognize that, when seen together, these descriptions all *point back to chapter 1*. Together they reiterate the *identity* of the Coming King, Judge and Redeemer: **Jesus**. *Take a look at Christ’s description in chapter 1, and then read these descriptions seen together:*

1. EPHESUS: “These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands...” (1:12, 13, 16)
2. SMYRNA: “These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life...” (1:17-18)
3. PERGAMUM: “These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword...” (1:16)
4. THYATIRA: “These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass...” (1:14-15)
5. SARDIS: “These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars...” (1:4, 16)
6. PHILADELPHIA: “These things says He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens...” (1:5, 16 – bigger key!)
7. LAODICEA: “These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God...” (1:5)

Here we can see that the *beginning* of each letter ties together with the others to tell us what is true because of the *identity* of our Coming King Jesus. Once that is clear, then we can more easily understand that the *end* of each letter tells us what will be true for us because of *our identity* in Christ as an *overcomer* (in line with John’s use in 1st John!).

Each letter, near its conclusion, contains a promise, usually translated, “To the one who overcomes...” Many pastors and professors argue that the “one who overcomes” must persevere either: (1) *in order to prove* they are a believer, or (2) *in order to obtain* what is promised (or avoid what is supposedly threatened). What we will see, however, is that when

⁸ This is in line with Occam's razor (or Ockham's razor), a principle from philosophy. Suppose an event has two possible explanations. The explanation that requires the fewest assumptions is usually correct. Another way of saying it is that the more assumptions you have to make, the more unlikely an explanation.

https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occam%27s_razor. Accessed 21April2023.

you see the promises as a whole, *together*, they point to things that *all* believers will experience in God's future rule, as spelled out in Revelation 20-22. In other words, **just like ALL** the self-descriptions point BACK to chapter 1 and *Christ's identity*, ALL the promises point forward to our future experience, based on *our identity as believers/overcomers*. The amazing piece is that each promise is still specific to each church for a specific reason! That's what I call a classic example of the inspiration of God's Word...

Take a look at what these promises look like when tied together as a unit or whole:

1. EPHESUS (2:7): *"To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."* >>> In Revelation 22, we see the complete restoration of God's design, where He has made every provision for His creation, including the tree of life. **Revelation 22:1** *And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. 4 They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. 14 Blessed are those who do His commandments (which only believers are empowered to do),⁹ that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city.*
2. SMYRNA (2:11): *"He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."* >>> The believers in Smyrna were under intense persecution, and many were martyred, or "hurt by the first death". Jesus' promise was that even though they might experience suffering in the "first death" (physical death), they would never be touched at all by the "second death". **Revelation 20: 6** *Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years. 14 Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. Revelation 21:7* *He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son. 8 But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."* Did you notice here how the "overcomer" is contrasted with the unbelievers who *will* experience the second death?
3. PERGAMUM (2:17): *"To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it."* >>> Manna may allude to two different things, but both include all believers and only believers. Hidden manna, if it alludes to the manna in the Ark of the Covenant, refers to God's provision of His presence; if to Jesus as the "manna" of life, then it is Jesus Himself.
 - Scholars propose various possible backgrounds of the white stone. Among the guesses: pebbles of various colors were used for admission to *public celebrations*; a black stone was the sacred symbol of the infamous Asian goddess Cybele; white stones used for *medical purposes* were associated with Judea; and perhaps somewhat more significantly, jurors used black stones to vote for a person's guilt but white ones to vote

⁹ While some use 22:14 to try to argue for perseverance in order to eat from the tree, it is only our new nature that is truly able to keep His commands, and only believers have that new nature. Beyond that, 22:14 has a manuscript variant: "Blessed are those who wash their robes..." That is as clear a reference to believers as you can find, especially when considering the robe images we see in Revelation!

for *innocence*. Though Pergamum usually used dark brown granite for building materials, they preferred white marble for *inscriptions*. For a new name, see Isaiah 6:2; for name change and promise, cf. Genesis 17:5, 15.¹⁰

Entrance into a celebration, healing, a declaration of innocence and a new name...all of these things are promised to “the overcomer”. Why would we make this about our performance when these are things which will be true for all believers based on their faith in Jesus? **Revelation 22:2** *...The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. 4 They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads.*

4. THYATIRA (2:26-28): *“And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations— ‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels’ — as I also have received from My Father; and I will give him the morning star.”* >>> If overcoming involves perseverance, why would Jesus ADD the requirement of perseverance (“AND keeps My works until the end”) to the promise to the church in Thyatira?! Unless one tries to argue for “degrees of perseverance,” it is very strange. But if Jesus is trying to say that perseverance is something *different* than overcoming, this makes sense.¹¹ And who will Jesus give Himself to in eternity, since He is the Morning Star? Wouldn’t that include every believer who is in heaven with Him? **Revelation 22:16** *“I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star.”*
5. SARDIS (3:5): *“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”* >>> “Clothed in white” alludes to the Roman toga, which all Roman citizens were privileged to wear.¹² By analogy, all believers are privileged to wear white robes washed in the blood of the Lamb! Also, all Greek and Roman cities had an official roll of citizens; names could be removed for various reasons. Once our name is on God’s roll (“the book of life”), it can never be removed. If you are a citizen, your name is there and you you’re your white toga... **Revelation 20:15** *And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.*
6. PHILADELPHIA (3:12): *“He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.”* >>> In Philadelphia, there were many earthquakes which would make the pillars fall. Jesus’ promise to us is BETTER! There will be no need to leave, and we will be forever in His presence. **Revelation 21:23** *The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. 24 And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. 25 Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). 26 And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it. 27 But there*

¹⁰ Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Second Edition. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014. Print.

¹¹ Notice that Thyatira introduces an *exception* to the rule of a simple promise by adding another part: “and keeps My works until the end.” The idea here is that reigning with Christ requires more than simply being a believer. Reigning is for those who have earned that authority, a reward to given to those who persevere (see 22:16).

¹² “Walking with Me in white”, however, was a reward given to those who shared in the battle... The victorious king would parade past his citizens (who were all clothed in white), followed by those whom he wished to honor.

*shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. **Revelation 22:4** They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads.*

7. LAODICEA (3:21): *"To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne."* If any of the seven promises might tempt me to look at performance, this one might... But remember this: Jesus *overcame* the world when He died and was resurrected, after which He sat down next to the Father. We overcome when we trusted Him to apply His victory to us, and so now are IN HIM. In fact, Paul says that *"we are more than conquerors* (literally "hyper-overcomers") *through Him who loved us"* (Romans 8:37). This is a reference to our *identity* as part of the Royal Heavenly Family, something that is true of *all believers*. **Revelation 22:4** *They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. 5 There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.*

While I understand that this discussion won't end the debate about the "overcomer", seeing the seven passages together as a whole should help us recognize that Jesus is making promises to His citizens that He will fulfill in chapters 20-22 *based on His victory*. An "overcomer" is anyone who has the *victory in Christ*, in line with John's usage in the letter of 1st John.

When the promises in Revelation 2 and 3 are seen as *fulfilled for every believer in the future*, there is no need for trying to "work around" problems that aren't there...

Revelation 21:7 *The overcomer shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.* GRACE.