

The Rewards for Overcomers in Revelation 2-3

There are two ways to view the rewards to the overcomers in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. In a previous GraceNotes (no. 97 “Who Are the Overcomers in Revelation 2-3?”), it was shown how overcomers could refer to all believers who overcome the world through initial faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. However, there are stronger arguments that these are Christians who endure trials faithfully after believing. The words translated “to him who overcomes” means “to him who conquerors” (a participle from *nikaō*). Jesus makes special promises of rewards to believers who overcome difficulties. The recurring phrase “to him who overcomes” suggests Jesus is not making promises to every person in the church, but only to certain individuals. Though some rewards are a bit enigmatic, there is some biblical evidence that can help us interpret them.

1. To the overcomer in the church at Ephesus (2:1-7)

The promise given in verse 7 is to those in the church who resist false teachers and persevere in good works. The one who overcomes will eat from the tree of life in paradise. Paradise evidently refers to the future of all believers in the presence of the Lord. Though all believers will be in His presence, only overcomers will eat from the tree of life. In Revelation 22:2, the tree of life and its fruit are mentioned, but it does not say all believers will eat that fruit. Revelation 22:14 shows that eating from the tree is the special privilege of those who obey God. The imagery of eating with the mention of life may imply the reward is greater intimacy through fellowship with the Lord of Life.

2. To the overcomer in the church at Smyrna (2:8-11)

In verses 10-11 two promises are given to those in the church who are faithful in persecution: the crown of life and a promise that the overcomer will not be hurt by the second death. The only other mention of the crown of life shows it is for those who suffer faithfully through trials (James 1:12). It denotes a heightened experience of God’s life in this world and the next, for God is life (John 1:4; 10:10b; 14:6). The promise to be unharmed by the second death would apply to all believers. However, it is used here as a strong reassurance (using a double negative in the Greek) of eternal security stated in a figure of speech called *litotes*, which is an understatement that affirms the opposite for the sake of emphasis (egs. “He called an ambulance because he had a little problem,” means, he had a serious problem; or “If you tour Israel, you won’t be sorry,” meaning, you will be delighted.). This strong reassurance of no second death emphasizes the opposite: a strong experience of God’s eternal life, or the crown of life.

3. To the overcomer in the church at Pergamos (2:12-17)

In verse 17, the overcomer in the church who does not compromise doctrinally or morally is promised both hidden manna and a white stone with a new name on it. Manna may imply the intimate presence of God, because in the tabernacle, manna was placed in the ark over which God dwelt (Ex. 16:33-34; Heb. 9:4). Since manna sustained God’s people in the wilderness it may also signify eternal sustenance from God’s special provision. The white stone implies it is a pure and precious stone. The color white suggests purity (Rev. 1:14) and a white stone seems to indicate special honor. The new name written on the stone is known only to the recipient suggesting special intimacy with Christ, the giver.

4. To the overcomer in the church at Thyatira (2:18-29)

The promises to the overcomer in this church are rewards for not embracing the false doctrine and immorality present in the church but persevering in faith and good works. Jesus promises power over the nations and the morning star (vv. 26-29). We know that all believers will rule with Christ, but some will have greater authority and proximity to Him (Matt. 19:28; 25:21, 23; Mark 10:35-40; Luke 19:16-19). “Star” and “Morning star” are sometimes used in the context of Christ as Ruler (Num. 24:17; Rev. 22:16). But more than a promise of position, it may imply that the overcomer will have a greater experience of the glory which is Christ’s as the Morning Star (Dan. 12:3; 1 Peter 1:19).

5. To the overcomer in the church at Sardis (3:1-6)

There are a few believers in the dead church at Sardis who have not engaged in the immorality that would have defiled them. In verses 5-6, Jesus makes three promises to anyone who overcomes this defilement. He will clothe him in white garments, his name will not be blotted out of the Book of Life (a registry of the saved), and Jesus will confess his name before God and His angels. The white garments are a contrast to the defiled garments in verse 4 and are associated with the righteous acts of the saints (Rev. 19:7-8). That they are worthy of walking with Christ in white (v. 4) must speak of rewards not salvation, because no one can be worthy of salvation. The phrase “I will not blot out...” again uses a *litotes* and a double negative (cf. 2:11 and Matt. 10:42, “He will certainly not lose his reward”) to emphasize the overcomer’s sure experience of eternal life and rewards. This highlights the certainty of the third promise that the overcomer will be greatly honored when Jesus pays tribute to him before the Father and the angels. To “confess” implies commendation (Matt. 10:32-33/Lk 12:8-9).

6. To the overcomer in the church at Philadelphia (3:7-13)

The overcomer in this church has persevered in keeping God’s commands. In verses 12-13, the overcomer is promised to be made a pillar in God’s temple and have the name of God written on him. As a place where God dwells, the temple signifies close intimacy with God. The promise to be made a pillar in the temple is symbolic of strength, stability, and permanency (Gal. 2:9; 1 Tim. 3:15; Rev. 10:1). Permanency is also denoted by the phrase “...he shall go out no more.” God’s new name written on the overcomer suggests a new and special identity in the temple of the New Jerusalem.

7. To the overcomer in the church at Laodicea (3:14-22)

The overcomer in this church is the one who forsakes his spiritual apathy and renews fellowship with Christ. The promise in verse 21 is that the overcomer will sit with Christ on His throne. This is not merely being in the presence of Christ but participating in His kingdom rule (Matt. 19:28). The reward is for those who overcome their trials just as Christ did His in order to sit with the Father on His throne. This could speak only of earned rewards, not the gift of salvation.

Conclusion

The overcomers in these seven churches are believers faced with trials unique to each of these first century churches. Overcoming trials for rewards is not the same as believing in Christ for salvation. The emphasis on works and perseverance points us towards rewards, not salvation, which is by unmerited grace. There is relevance for believers today also. We are reminded that the choices we make in this life will have consequences in our next life in eternity. Jesus Christ will reward for all eternity believers who persevere in faithfulness and good works.