

The Victorious Christian Life
A Lesson Series for the Earnest Christian

Thomas W. Finley

THE VICTORIOUS CHRISTIAN LIFE

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Introduction

The victorious Christian life is the life that God wants to see lived by us. It is not sinless perfection, yet it is the growing consistency of a holy life and witness in many areas. We should not be satisfied with anything less.

If you have experienced a cycle of failure and confession over some “besetting sin” that seems to have a grip on you, and you truly want victory, then this book is for you. If your Christian life is inconsistent and you are not satisfied with it, then this book is also for you. If you want to grow in the Lord, and wish to know Him more deeply and intimately, then this book is for you.

The victorious Christian life is Christ Himself living in us and through us. It is not us trying harder to please God. Quite frankly, the harder we try in our own effort to live up to God’s standard, the more certain our failure will be. God wants to supply us with His victorious life. In this series of topics, or lessons, we will explore how we can tap into the supply of Christ’s life that is within every believer.

This book is not a comprehensive work of all of the aspects of the Christian life, but it will provide a foundation for you. We will explore truths, principles and practices that have been tested over time by victorious Christians throughout the centuries. All that I have set forth here is based upon Scripture and the best writings that I have found on the Christian life. Finally, I can testify that everything I pass on here has been tested in my own experience. I am not perfect, but by God’s grace I do know the life of victory over so many things in my own experience. For this I give praise and glory to God.

It should be helpful at this point to provide you with an overview of what we will cover. Some of you may not be as drawn to the doctrinal aspects of the book, especially in the section on the “identification truths” (Lessons 4-7). These are those Biblical truths that show us that we are fully identified with Christ in His death and in His resurrection. Yet this doctrinal foundation is vital. Paul wrote to the Romans: “Or do you not KNOW that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?” (Rom. 6:3). All of our experience must be based upon truth. In talking to the Jews who had believed in Him, Jesus pointed out that they needed to be free from the enslavement to sin, and He said: “If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” (Jn. 8:31-32).

Because truth is the foundation for our experience, I encourage you to persevere in reading the somewhat doctrinal portions. By the way, these sections also include practical application to our experience. Then, as you can see from the overview below, there are other sections which touch more on our practices and on our attitudes as “overcomers” (victorious ones). There is nothing wrong in skipping ahead to look at these areas if you get bogged down in reading some of the more doctrinal lessons. However, I would urge you to be sure to read all of the lessons in order to get a balanced and inclusive view of how to be victorious. May God richly bless you with His Spirit as you read and consider these things.

- Views of the unbeliever and the believer. These three lessons will give you a solid, Biblical understanding of the life of the unbeliever, the life of the believer as seen “in Christ,” and the life of the believer in his experience. These lessons will greatly benefit your understanding of some of the contradictions and struggles you sense as a believer in Christ.

- The “Identification Truths.” Here we look at the Scriptural truth that our old fallen life was crucified with Christ. Additionally, we see that we have risen with Christ to live out a new life,

which is Christ in us. These lessons will show us how to transfer these truths into our experience. Common mistakes that believers make in trying to live the Christian life are corrected here.

- Freedom from the law and life in the spirit. These vital lessons explain how we serve and please God in the New Testament era. We are freed not only from the commandments of the law, but even the principle of the law. Now we are under the principle of grace, which supplies and empowers us. Now we serve God by living in our spirit in union with Christ. We follow Him through the living direction and power of the Holy Spirit, not through our efforts to keep commandments.

- Characteristics of the overcomer. In these lessons we gain insight into the disposition and attitudes of victorious Christians. Seeing these will help us shape our own heart attitudes.

- Practices of the overcomer. Here we explore the Christian disciplines that are indispensable if we wish to be victorious.

- God's call to overcome. In these lessons we see that God is calling believers to overcome more than just sin. We are to overcome sin, evil, the devil, the world, false prophets, negative circumstances, and degraded church situations. We are also to be victorious in good works, carrying out those works which God has prepared for us. By learning where God wants us to overcome, we can more accurately interpret what the Holy Spirit is trying to do in our life. In this way, we can cooperate with His working

LESSON 1

View of the Unbeliever

The first view we need to clearly see is the picture of a person who has not yet believed in Christ. This is a person still “in Adam.” This is the unregenerate person. The “old man” of Romans 6:6 is who we were in our unregenerate state.

Men outside of Christ are inherently sinful. Sin is embedded in their nature and they commit sins because of this sinful element within them. What is sin? The common Greek word for sin is *hamartia* (Strong’s #266), which means “missing the mark.” When an archer aims for the target’s bulls-eye and misses, he misses the mark. Christ, as God in the flesh, was without sin in His human living (Heb. 4:15). This helps us see “the bulls-eye” – Christ Himself. When Christ is seen in the living of a human, He is especially seen in His unique moral character. Not only was Christ’s character perfect, but He also perfectly followed God’s will for each step of His life (Jn. 6:38; Phil. 2:8). By this we can see that **sin is anything in a person’s life that does not conform to Christ, particularly His moral character and His obedience to the will of God.**

Sin can be in the form of an act, a disposition, or a state of man. When we consider an act of sin it seems that sin can include any meditation of the heart, any attitude, or any action that does not conform to God’s character or God’s will. Let’s clarify “meditation of the heart” – an inner, unseen sin. For the believer (or unbeliever), a sudden thought, even a very evil thought, is not in itself sin. It may come to our minds by way of our old sinful nature, or spiritual forces allied with the devil. Yet, it is only as we accept that invitation to sinful thinking and dwell upon it, relishing it and giving way to it, that sin is brought forth in God’s eyes (Jas. 1:13-15). The involuntary thought is not sin, but the voluntary meditation upon that thought at some point becomes a sin.

Below are two basic characteristics of a person who is an unbeliever:

All humans are born with a sinful disposition. Human nature, in its broadest sense, means that unique set of attributes which makes man a distinct creature. For example, the sum total of a human being’s attributes clearly distinguishes human nature from the elephant, which has its own unique set of attributes. Adam was not created sinful, but through disobedience to God sin entered the world and affected the entire human race (Rom. 5:12, 19). Now, all humans have an embedded sinful disposition. They retain a distinctly human nature, but an additional corrupting factor has come in. This sinful disposition is passed on from generation to generation of humans by birth.

This sinful disposition has two fundamental and related characteristics: 1) It is at enmity with God – it resists God and His will (Rom. 5:10; 8:7); 2) It is unholy, unlike the moral character of God (Rom. 3:23; 1 Pet. 1:14, 15).

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.” (Ps. 51:5)

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23)

“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.” (Rom. 5:12)

“For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.” (Rom. 5:19)

All unbelievers are slaves of sin. Not all men (unbelievers) commit the same sins, or are equally sinful. Yet, it is a key concept that fallen man is indeed a slave of sin and is **strongly bound in a master/slave relationship to indwelling sin**. An unregenerate person is held utterly captive to the mastery of his sinful disposition and cannot escape its controlling power.

“But thanks be to God that though **you were slaves of sin**, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed.” (Rom. 6:17)

“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, **indulging the desires of the flesh** and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.” (Eph. 2:1-3)

In the verses just above we see that the unbeliever indulges, or yields to, the lusts of the flesh. The “desires of the flesh” here refers to the desires of the fallen sinful nature within man, which includes corrupt desires of the body, the soul and the spirit. Thus the unbeliever’s life is controlled by the sinful nature.

LESSON 2

View of the Believer as a New Creation

This view of the believer depicts the truth of who we are according to spiritual reality. It does not represent how we always live in our daily experience in this life. The view of the believer in Lesson Three will cover the matter of our daily experience.

We are a “new creation” according to God’s spiritual view, according to our “position in Christ,” and also according to actual spiritual reality. When we are born again, we became such totally new creations.

“Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is **a new creature**; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” (2 Cor. 5:16, 17)

In the passage above, to recognize someone “according to the flesh” means to view them from an understanding and perspective that is merely human. In contrast, to know others and Christ in a spiritual way is to perceive them with spiritual revelation and according to spiritual reality. In Matt. 16:13 Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Their answer indicated that people viewed Jesus as perhaps John the Baptist or one of the prophets. But, Peter then correctly recognized who Jesus really was, not just who He appeared to be by human estimation. Because Peter had spiritual revelation of who Jesus was, he could say that He was the Messiah. The passage above then states that “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature.” This means that a believer correctly viewed according to spiritual reality and revelation is a totally new person.

Notice in the passage above it states that the old things have passed away and now new things have come. The person we now are, according to the realm of spiritual reality, is totally different than the person we were before our regeneration (our being born again). It is important to realize that this radical difference is in the spiritual realm, not in the realm of what we and others see and experience here and now in our fleshly existence. Yet, as we shall see later, the effect of this spiritual change can increasingly be manifested here in this life.

Who we now are “in Christ” is not just a matter of how God views us. It is not just a theoretical matter. An actual change has taken place in our being. When we believed in Christ we were literally “born again” with a new life imparted to us by God. This new life is in our being today. Jesus described this new birth in John 3:

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” (Jn. 3:6)

Here Jesus contrasts our physical birth from physical parents to our spiritual birth by the Holy Spirit. The Bible is specific here in telling us that what has been born of the Spirit is spirit, referring to our human spirit. We believers are of three distinct parts: spirit, soul, and body. This is shown in the following verse:

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Thess. 5:23)

The new birth changes our person according to the spiritual realm and it also begins a process of real change in our life here and now. At the moment we are born again, our human spirit is completely changed by the impartation of the life of God. Our soul and our body, however, are not really changed at the instant of the new birth, except, of course, our thinking about Christ and His redemption has changed. Our soul has the basic faculties of our mind (thinking), our emotions and our will. Our living as humans is an expression of our inner soul, and thus our living is based upon our thinking (our mind), our emotions and our will (decisions). This expression of our soul, how we live our lives out, should gradually change in our experience in this life now, based upon the spiritual change that has already taken place in our spirits. Also, the use of our bodies should also begin to change after we are born again.

The new birth of our spirit brings the impartation of a new disposition within our human spirit. This disposition has the holy nature of God, which is the holiness of His moral character. The Bible tells us that we are born again of the imperishable seed of God through the living word of God (1 Pet. 1:23). This new holy disposition within is also seen in the fact that we have become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). In line with the rest of the Bible and the context of this verse, we understand that "the divine nature" is God's unique and pure moral character, not His personal attributes of deity like omnipotence. Our human spirit is said to be alive, or literally "life": "If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive [literally, "life"] because of righteousness" (Rom. 8:10). The "life" here speaks of the unique moral character of God's life as the essence of our reborn spirit.

The new disposition now in our human spirit gives us a desire to be obedient to God. This new disposition gives us a strong desire for holy living. Also, this new disposition gives us all new capacities for living as a human being. This holy disposition equips us with "the mind of Christ," which is the ability to understand spiritual truths, to know God, and to have a way of thinking like God (1 Cor. 2:16). Also, because we possess a new disposition, we have a new capacity to exhibit godly emotions. All of the admonitions of the New Testament to love are based upon this new capacity, which is God's love within us, within our new disposition (1 Jn. 4:7). Finally, we have a new capacity to choose (the will), which is inherent in the new disposition. Christ always chose to do the will of the Father, and we now have Jesus' life in our new disposition.

In the next lesson we shall see something of the inner battle within us, which frustrates us from always living in accordance with our new disposition. Nevertheless, it is extremely important for us to continually confirm the truth of what has happened to us when we believed. At that point, according to the spiritual realm, we became new creations. We are now no longer who we were. As we are now "in Christ," that is we are now "united with Him," the old things have passed away and new things have come. We have changed radically. In addition, even now in our experience something has happened. We have been reborn in our human spirits. Our spirits have been reconstituted with a holy disposition, which matches the holy character of God, our Father. Surely our response to these truths must be "Hallelujah!"

LESSON 3

View of the Believer According to Experience

In looking at our actual experience as a believer we are struck by something. We sense that we have undergone some type of change since we believed in Christ. We at least now believe that He really is the Savior. Our knowledge of Him is not simply related to history or theology, but it is something we know deep within. He has become real. We also now have a certain love towards Christ and some desire to please Him and obey Him. On the other hand, there often seems to be a contrary attitude within us. We still seem to want to be independent of God and do what we wish with our lives. The old temptations to sin and the love of the things of this world, which dominated our lives as an unbeliever, seem to be very much alive within us still. Too many times we actually want to go along with these temptations and longings. Some sins still seem to hold some attraction for us.

Thus, we are left with a number of questions. Did I really get “saved?” If I am a Christian, why do I have these struggles with sin and why do I sometimes wish to ignore God and choose my own way? If I do some of the same sinful things I did before I got “saved,” am I not, then, still a “sinner?” If I am trying to “do better,” yet still experiencing failure, why?

Much of our frustration is due to a lack of understanding and wrong expectations. Let us now try to clarify the truth, see the truth, and believe the truth.

The conflict within us is due to the presence of two dispositions within our being. There is indeed a conflict of desires and intentions within us after we are born again. In Lesson One we saw that all humans have a sinful disposition within them from birth, urging them to sin, and even compelling them to carry out sins, as a master rules over a slave. Guess what? This sinful disposition (or sin nature or indwelling sin) remains within us, within our being, even after our spirits are born again by the Spirit of God. It is still there, as ugly as ever, bothering us all the time with sinful thoughts, urges, suggestions and temptations! On the other hand, within our reborn spirits, is a holy disposition, which gives us a desire to live a godly life, a life pleasing to God and obedient to God. There could not be two more opposite “attitudes” in the universe! And yet these two different “attitudes” are both within us in our experience!

Let me hasten to say, however, that as we mature as a believer we learn how to cut off and “defuse” the power of the thoughts and urgings of the sinful disposition within us. A simple but imperfect illustration might help. Picture the sinful disposition as a radio and its music as its thoughts or urgings. As each of us likes different types of music, so our sinful dispositions do vary some. Some people may be more prone to one type of sin than another. On the other hand, some sins seem to grab at us all, and these are like certain beautiful songs that everyone enjoys. When a radio plays one of your favorite tunes, it is hard not to hum along or sing along. The tune is the kind you like and you naturally fall into line, humming along with it. When a mature believer starts to hear one of his favorite “songs” being played by his radio (his sinful disposition), he has learned how to react quickly to “turn down the volume” so that the music loses its compelling power. This is one of the great blessings of living more and more in the victory of Christ. However, even the very mature believer is keenly aware of the presence of sin within him, and knows that it is ever trying, if possible, to make him fail. The victorious believer never gets rid of the sinful disposition and its promptings; he only learns to walk in victory by denying sin’s rule in his life.

In summary, the fact is that in the experience of the believer, he never gets rid of the sinful disposition in this life, which is constantly urging him to act contrary to God's will and God's holy nature. Two dispositions – one geared to holiness and the other to sin - are there within us, in conflict, every day of our human lives. We will say more about this conflict in future lessons.

We are saints, not sinners, in our true identity. This fact is a vital fact that every child of God must lay hold of. It is critical if we are to have victory!

Yes, we have two dispositions within us which oppose each other in our experience. Both are operating to influence and control us. However, we are not two persons. Additionally, we are not one person with two personalities. According to God's revelation we are clearly "saints," meaning sanctified or holy ones. This truth concurs with what we saw in Lesson Two. We are saints in God's spiritual view, but this spiritual fact about "who we are" is also a present reality in our spirits, the deepest part of our being. Therefore, **our identity – who we really are - is a child of God, a saint.** It is vitally important to always **stand upon the truth of who you are, not what you may feel like** due to the presence of sin or due to a failure in committing a sin. Here are some spiritual facts about who we are now that we have been born again:

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth with **all the saints** who are throughout Achaia" (2 Cor. 1:1)

"Beloved, **now we are children of God**, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is." (1 Jn 3:2)

"For **you are all sons of God** through faith in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:26)

"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is **a new creature**; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." (2 Cor. 5:17)

The Bible clearly teaches that unsaved men and women are "sinners." That is who they are in their identity and in their constitution (Lk. 5:30, 32; 18:13; Rom. 5:8, 19). Saved persons, however, are not described in the Scripture as "sinners" in reference to who they actually are. There are at least three Scriptures which clearly call a Christian a "sinner." However, we need to examine these verses carefully to understand them. Let's look at these verses:

"It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all." (1 Tim. 1:15)

Although Paul uses the present tense here in stating that he is the "foremost" sinner, the context (verses 13-16) clearly shows that the sinful actions showing him to be the foremost sinner were associated with his life prior to his dramatic conversion in Acts 9. Therefore, his reference to himself as being a sinner is a reference to "his flesh," – the life he lived when he was "in the flesh." The "flesh" is the constitution of the fallen life, the individual's entire personality in Adam, thoroughly corrupted by sin through the fall. The "flesh" was still with Paul, in his being and experience in this body, so he can refer to that old life in a present sense (Gal. 5:16-25). But, he surely was not referring to his spiritual and true self. Paul was infinitely clear that he was no longer a sinner according to spiritual reality. Instead, the life he lived was not the old "I," but the

new “I,” which was Christ living in him (Gal. 2:20). Paul could state that “who he was” had died and Christ was now his life (Col. 3:3-4).

“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” (Jas. 4:8)

The context of this verse, which is addressed to born again believers, is clearly one addressing behavior. James 4:1-6 speaks of these believers as having given way to the desires of their “flesh” (the old corrupted life they had “in Adam”) and to the love of this world. They had been blatantly sinning and could thus be described by James as “sinners” because of their actions. But, this does not make them sinners by their real constitution. In fact, James calls these believers “my beloved brethren” (1:19), and declares that they are included in God’s action of grace in the impartation of new life through the new birth: “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures” (Jas. 1:18). Here, the phrase “we would be a kind of first fruits” definitely points to a change of our constitution, what we have become. Sometimes parents may call their children “monkeys” because the children are acting up like monkeys do, but the children are not monkeys in their nature.

“My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” (Jas. 5:19-20)

It seems clear from the context here in James 5 that the “sinner” is a believer who has strayed. Thus, I interpret the meaning of “sinner” here to refer to conduct, not to constitution.

We should never think of our real selves, who we truly are in our identity, as a “sinner.” That is a great mistake that will cause us problems. Such a view will impair confident fellowship with God, and we will also be tempted to seek for a change in our “flesh.” The lack of such a change will be most discouraging.

We are “justified from sin.” There is no doubt that the presence of the sin nature, or sinful disposition, within us is perhaps the most bothersome and unsettling thing in our experience as a believer. When we truly desire to follow Christ, we hate this disposition within us that often gives us opposite desires and “fights against” our will to supremely love and follow Christ. And, the worst part of it is this: these desires seem somehow to be a part of “us,” not something totally foreign. This is true because the desires of our “flesh,” especially certain ones, often still have a strange attraction for us, in spite of our loyalty to Christ. In spite of knowing better, we are at times strongly tempted to go along with these fallen desires, especially ones that are like that favorite tune being played on the radio. For one person it may be a desire to gossip, for another it may be a tendency to hold onto a grudge or hatred, for another it may be a tendency towards outbursts of anger, for another it may be an hour of self-indulgence in some worldly pleasure without regard for the will of God, for another it may be a sexual desire outside of God’s will. Because this is our inner experience, we therefore feel guilt and condemnation about “being this way” or “having these desires.”

Here is “good news.” Firstly, we must affirm that **the flesh is no longer “us,”** even though it remains within us after being born again. The flesh belongs to the former life we had when we were “in Adam.” Yet, as we shall see in future lessons, we have been totally transferred out of

Adam into Christ. We must affirm **that we are now children of God and that Christ is our very life** (1 Jn. 3:2; Col. 3:3-4). Secondly, we need to see the following very important truth:

“For he that has died is justified from sin.” (Rom. 6:7, Darby)

The Darby translation above is accurate, according to the Greek. Some translations use the word “freed” instead of “justified.” The context of this verse does, of course, lend itself to a translation of “freed,” since the emphasis here in Romans 6 is one of freedom from the dominion of sin. Yet the Greek verb is *dikaioo* (Strong’s # 1344), which carries a clear meaning of “to justify,” or “declare righteous.” Paul used this verb this way in Romans many times in speaking of man being justified before God.

This verse declares that we are not under any condemnation from God because of the sin principle which remains within us. This is because we participated with Christ in His death (Rom. 6:3, 5, 6), and at the time of His death, sin itself was condemned once for all (Rom. 8:3). God has already carried out His judgment upon the sin nature in man when Christ was identified with sin at the cross (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 8:3). Since the penalty for sin has been already paid, and since we, as the guilty ones, died with Christ, we now stand justified – declared righteous – from sin and its guilt before God. Once a criminal is executed for his crime and dies, the justice of the law is satisfied and he no longer stands under condemnation. All legal obligations upon his former life are canceled. This means that we should never feel guilty or condemned because of the ugliness of the sin principle within us! We should strongly reject these “feelings” of guilt and stand on the truth of Rom. 6:7 – we are justified (declared righteous) from sin. We died with Christ when He died to bear God’s judgment upon sin itself (not sins, plural). Christ also bore our sins, but here the Bible speaks of sin, not sins. Therefore, we are declared righteous from the guilt of indwelling sin, and we are also freed from its position over us as a master, according to Romans 6. We are no longer under sin’s condemnation or its dominion! It no longer holds any legal claim upon us whatsoever!

This startling truth gives us wonderful boldness before God. When we approach the presence of a holy God we usually do sense a real consciousness of the sinfulness that is still within us. This can hold us back from approaching God with confidence and believing that God would accept us and hear our petitions. This is why the writer of Hebrews encourages us to “have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus” and to “draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (Heb. 10:19, 22). Of course, we also need to clear up any sins we have committed before God in order to have boldness to enter His presence and have fellowship with Him. We should feel guilt for our specific sins, but never for the presence of the sin principle that remains within us. We can clear away the guilt of any sins we commit through the sincere confession of our sins (1 Jn. 1:9).

We need a proper understanding of transformation. Because there is confusion about the matters noted above, there is also confusion about “transformation,” or change in a believer’s life. The Bible clearly reveals that the old corrupted life of the flesh is not to be changed. Rather it is under God’s judgment and He has no intention to renovate it (Rom. 8:3, 8; 13:14; Gal. 5:17, 24; 6:8; Phil. 3:3; Col. 2:11, 13). Unfortunately, it is right at this point that many well-meaning saints are led astray. They plead with God to “change them,” meaning they are asking God to either take away or purify the sinful nature within them with its corrupt desires. They feel that if their Christian life is to be a “new life” then God must be going to change the old fallen nature of their flesh and make it new, thus eliminating all the sinful and ugly desires and attitudes within them. To their dismay, they actually find that the closer they get to God’s presence and the more they

read His word, the more sinful they feel. As they move closer to God in seeking after Him, His holy light comes upon them, revealing even greater ugliness within their fallen flesh! This in turn causes them to be more desperate for God to “change them,” or work to eliminate the fallen desires of their old life.

However, God’s way is not to change, or take away, the sinful flesh within the believer. Rather, He adds a new holy nature to the believer’s spirit. Now the believer must learn to live with the sinful nature, but not allow it to rule in his life or manifest itself in the actual carrying out of sins. In the ideal Christian walk by the Spirit, the desires of the flesh are not eliminated, but simply not carried out, or acted upon. “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16).

Here is an illustration that may help us see our inner situation. I used to be in the insurance business and we were very aware of fire hazards. If we learned that a building had a certain type of old wiring, then we would request that the wiring be updated. Sometimes the old wiring was evidenced by noticeable problems, such as lights flickering or fuses blowing out or circuit breakers tripped. Let’s say that this old and deficient wiring system pictures the old flesh nature within us, which includes embedded sin. The problems exhibited by the bad wiring might be a picture of the sins produced by the sin nature. Now, how do we solve the problem? One way would be to attempt to improve the old wiring through renovation, upgrading it at certain points, although in reality this could never be done efficiently with real wiring. This might picture trying to improve “the flesh” or change it to make it acceptable before God so that it does not produce sins. A second method might be to totally strip out the entire wiring system and replace it with a new system. A few Christians believe that it is possible to completely eliminate their old sinful flesh and never sin again. But, this theory always proves faulty. Even the most mature believer would never claim that they do not or cannot sin anymore.

Then there is a third possibility. We could just leave the old wiring in place and install entirely new wiring along another path in the house, still connecting it to the same outlets in the house. A new electrical junction box could be installed and the power supply from the electric company could be connected to it. For the sake of this illustration, we might say that the old junction box is still in place but the power lever is placed in the “OFF” position. For the new box, the power lever is placed in the “ON” position. So, as long as the lever remains “ON” for the new box, a new quality of light and power is produced. However, anytime someone places the new box into the “OFF” position, and the old box into the “ON” position, the old problems of the old wiring show up. The lights may flicker or the circuit breakers might trip from an overload. This third picture is really a true picture of the believer. He still has the old system of deficient wiring with its problems – the flesh with its sin nature and its deficient power source. Yet, he also has a new system installed which can produce beautiful lighting. The new system pictures the holy disposition of Christ. We should note, however, that the new system (the new disposition within) cannot operate without being vitally connected to the supply of electricity coming from the power plant. In other words, the living of our new life within is always dependent upon a moment-by-moment supply from the Holy Spirit Himself. The new life in our spirits is designed to operate only by the power of Holy Spirit. Our spirit and the Holy Spirit are in a union that makes victory possible (1 Cor. 6:17). Thus, ultimately the battle is shown to be one between the flesh and the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:17). The truth is, however, that a believer can live either according to the flesh or according to the Spirit (Gal. 5:16; Rom. 8:4-7). A believer can thus either produce the works of the flesh, or the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:17-23).

What is transformed in the believer? His flesh is not transformed, but his living is transformed – his attitudes and his behavior are changed. His character should be changed in its expression. Perhaps before the believer was a thief, but now he steals no longer and gives generously to others. Before he may have cursed, but now he curses no longer. Maybe before he was known to be mean, yet now he is kind in his manner. Perhaps the believer was hateful before, but now he loves. Perhaps a teenager was rebellious toward his parents previously, but now he is submissive. Maybe a woman was previously characterized by anxiety and fear, but now she is calm, trusting in the Lord. These are changes in character, changes in behavior! These are the types of changes God desires to see in us. He has installed His life within us, and as we learn how to use that switch to the new junction box we can see His life lived out of us in an increasing manner.

The New Testament uses the word for “transformed” twice for believers. The first verse we will look at is in 2 Corinthians:

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being **transformed** into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.” (2 Cor. 3:18)

This verse tells us that we are being changed into Christ’s image, that is, into a living that reflects Christ’s living. There is also another truth here, namely that Christ’s life is seen through us in an increasing way. His life develops within us “from glory to glory,” from one degree of expression to a greater degree. This truth is in accordance with other passages in the New Testament, including the following verse, which tells us that the “new man” (which carries both a corporate and an individual aspect) is “being renewed” in God’s image. The word “renewing” here means a continual change due to growing up, increasing in maturity. Notice that in the verse below it is the “new man,” not the “old man,” which is being renewed.

“Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on **the new self [man] who is being renewed** to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.” (Col. 3:9-10)

The second verse regarding transformation is in Romans:

“And do not be conformed to this world, but **be transformed** by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Rom. 12:2)

Here we see transformation in the believer’s life as a change in living stemming from an enlightened mind. The new living is according to the will of God rather than according to the pattern provided by the world. Again, this is not a change of “the flesh,” but a change in the living of the person produced by living in accordance with (under the influence of) the indwelling Spirit in our spirit, rather than in accordance with (under the influence of) the indwelling flesh.

We can now see that a large part of the victorious life is one where there is a pattern of victory over the sinful flesh. We are not speaking of sinless perfection, but of a growing consistency in Christian living, which manifests the life of Christ “from glory to glory.” Understanding the key truths in these last three lessons gives us a solid foundation on which to build. It is the goal of all of these lessons to help us achieve the victory provided for us in Christ!

LESSON 4

In Adam vs. in Christ

The Christian life is a life of faith. Faith is based upon and lays hold of spiritual truths (Rom. 10:17). No one can live the victorious Christian life without the word of God and its truths being central in his walk. Therefore, it is important that we see certain key truths and meditate upon them. We will talk about our experience in future lessons, but proper Christian experience must flow out of faith, which is the act of trusting in God's Word and God Himself. To help our experience, we must begin with learning key spiritual facts. These key facts have to do with our "identification with Christ" - who we are in Him and how we share in His death and resurrection.

Our relationship to two men

"In Adam" or "in Christ" are terms which show the "position" of people relative to these two men. In other words, every person is located either "in Adam" or "in Christ." Adam and Christ were representative men, representing all those people that are included within them. They are the federal heads of two "races" of men, so to speak. Romans chapter five shows that the actions of each of these two men were done in a representative way so that the one person's actions (Adam or Christ) affected all of those persons either "in Adam" or "in Christ."

Adam's disobedience brought in sin and God's judicial condemnation of death to all persons in Adam. All mankind was affected when Adam sinned. We are sinners because we were "in him" when he sinned. This idea is not easy to see, since we were not in the garden of Eden personally when Adam sinned. However, the Biblical thought is that we were all there in Adam when he sinned as our forefather, and his choice of disobedience represented the choice of all men, the human race. This thought of the inclusion of descendants in the actions of a forefather is also seen in Heb. 7:4-10. In that passage Levi is a descendant of Abraham. Yet when Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, Levi is also viewed as paying tithes. This idea of inclusion in the actions of a representative forefather does not eliminate personal responsibility and accountability, which is a Biblical principle. Yet, in the matter of the choice to sin by Adam, the head of our human race, we are all included. God knows that Adam's choice would indeed have been the choice of any human when tempted by the devil. Thus, the word of God can faithfully record that "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12).

Man's constitution is that of a sinner, one who acts in rebellion against God (Ps.51:5). No matter how refined, nice or good some men may seem to be, all men are sinners. So, man's problem is not just that he has sinned in disobedience to God, and thus has a record of sins against God. The problem is deeper. Men in Adam are sinners, and thus they themselves, not just their actions, are condemned by God. But, in Christ, (as seen in the accompanying chart) we have justification, righteousness, and life! We are made righteous, just as we were made sinners!

Meditate on the verses in the chart comparing "in Adam" to "in Christ." Which man do you like? With which one do you wish to be joined? Which one do you wish to live in and experience? Today man has two sources from which to live – Adam or Christ (these are also reflected in the terms "the flesh" or "the Spirit"). In our next lesson we will see how God transfers us out of Adam and into Christ. Then, we will begin to see how to live our lives in Christ.

IN ADAM	IN CHRIST
"the first man Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45, KJV)	"the last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45, KJV)
"in Adam all die" (1 Cor. 15:22, KJV)	"in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22, KJV)
"by the one man's offense the many died" (Rom. 5:15, NKJV)	"much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many" (Rom. 5:15, NKJV)
"the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation " (Rom. 5:16, NKJV)	"but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification " (Rom. 5:16, NKJV)
"For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one" (Rom. 5:17, NKJV)	"much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:17, NKJV)
"Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation " (Rom. 5:18, NKJV)	"even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life " (Rom. 5:18, NKJV)
"For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners " (Rom. 5:19, KJV)	"so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous " (Rom. 5:19, KJV)

LESSON 5

How God Transferred Us from Adam into Christ

From one perspective, we have very little to do with our transfer from Adam into Christ. Yet, we derive all of the benefits. Now we begin to see the *identification truths*.

“But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.” (1 Cor. 1:30)

“For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” (Col. 1:13)

God delivered us from the fallen Adamic race through Christ. The first step of this deliverance was for Christ to become a man, to be united with mankind. “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14, KJV). Christ joined the human race as the “last Adam” (1 Cor. 15:45), the final federal head of man. He did this so that He could more than undo the damage done to man through the fall.

We should note that when Christ became flesh, He was not identified with man in man’s sinful condition. Christ knew no sin in His human living (Heb.4:15). As we shall see, it was only on the cross that Christ became identified with man’s sinfulness.

In His death on the cross, Christ dealt with a number of man’s problems, but for our study purposes here, we will speak of only two of these problems. Firstly, He dealt with man’s sins, man’s record of unrighteous actions before God.

“By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all . . . He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God.” (Heb. 10:10-12)

However, as we have seen, we have a deeper problem than our sins. In Adam, we ourselves are sinners. Our very constitution is wrong! So, Christ also came to deal a death blow to the sin principle that reigns within man.

“For what the Law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh.” (Rom. 8:3, KJV)

In this verse we see the mind and intention of God. Christ was identified with the fallen Adamic race by being “in the *likeness* of sinful flesh” (not the *reality* of sinful flesh) in order to deal with sin itself (the sin principle within man). God judged the sin within man at the cross. He condemned it to the death it deserved in the eyes of a holy and righteous God. On the cross, Christ not only took upon Himself the sins of the world (1 Pet. 2:24), but He also became sin itself in the eyes of God, so that God could fully judge sinful man.

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” (2 Cor. 5:21)

Thus, at the cross, in Christ, God judged not only what we have done, but also who we were – sinners. There at the cross God dealt with who we were as sinful men, so that He could then righteously remove us from Adam and create us anew in Christ.

Praise the Lord that we did not have to bear this punishment! Christ bore it for us!

This matter is clearly seen in Romans 6:6. Romans 6:6 is a key verse in experiencing the victorious Christian life. Here we bring into focus our transfer from Adam into Christ.

“Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with *Him*, that our body of sin might be made powerless, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.” (Rom. 6:6, marginal reading)

In the Amplified Version this important verse reads:

“We know that our old (unrenewed) self was nailed to the cross with Him in order that [our] body, [which is the instrument] of sin, might be made ineffective and inactive for evil, that we might no longer be the slaves of sin.” (Rom. 6:6, AMP)

What exactly is “our old man” that was crucified with Christ? It is our former self, characterized by the sinful disposition within fallen men in Adam. **Christ, as the Last Adam, took all that we were to the cross and we were crucified with Him there.** As the rest of the verse (Romans 6:6) and context state, the purpose of our being crucified with Christ is that the power and dominion of sin can now be broken in our lives. More will be said about this in a future lesson.

Christ’s first step to deliver fallen mankind was to become flesh. His second step was to be a sacrifice for sins, and to condemn sin in the flesh, thus putting to death what we were in Adam. God’s third step was to raise us up as a new creation in Christ.

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus.” (Eph. 2:4-6)

The secret of the transfer

We were there “in Christ” at the cross, and we were there being made alive with Christ (as a new creation), being raised up with Him. **The secret of our transfer from Adam to Christ is that we, as believers, are joined with Christ in His death and in His resurrection.** Christ ended His relationship with the fallen race and sin at the point of His death on the cross. He died to His identification with sin after He was judged at the cross in our place. “For the death that He died, He died to sin, once for all” (Rom. 6:10). Then, “Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father” (Rom. 6:4), in order to live in resurrection to God (Rom. 6:10).

Romans chapter 6 is a crucial chapter for the victorious Christian. This chapter tells us that because of our union with Christ we share in Christ’s victory. We learn here that we “died to sin” by being included in His death (6:2-3). This means that our relationship with sin has undergone a radical change now that we are believers. Formerly, as sinners in Adam, sin reigned within us and was our master (Rom. 6:17). But, the good news is that we share in Christ’s death (Rom. 6:3), and “the death that He died, He died to sin” (Rom. 6:10). Therefore, sin no longer has any right to rule over us, and we can successfully resist its appeals to us to commit sins. This passage goes on to tell us that in resurrection the life which “He [Christ] lives, He lives to God”

(Rom. 6:10). We also now share in this life lived to God: “so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). “Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11). Thus, we can freely present ourselves to God to live righteously (Rom. 6:13). We share in the power of Christ’s resurrection and Christ’s life so that we can freely do God’s will.

Let us be sure here to separate spiritual fact from potential experience. The spiritual facts are these: we were crucified with Christ and we were raised up in resurrection with Christ. In this resurrection we have a new life, not like the old life in Adam. These facts have already happened in the spiritual realm. We have already been transferred out of Adam into Christ. These momentous spiritual facts prepare us for the potential of great spiritual experience – a life actually lived dead to sin and alive to God.

Here is an illustration. Let’s say that I buy an airplane ticket to go from Charlotte to Seattle. Once I get on board, I do nothing to get to Seattle. I just sit in the plane. The powerful jet does all the work as it revs up, takes off and climbs into the sky. Then it flies 600 mile per hour into head winds and lands in Seattle. How did I get to Seattle? I was just there in the plane. Wherever it went, I went. It did all of the work. Once we receive Christ it is like boarding the plane. He has done all of the work to transfer us from our old place in Adam to our new place in Christ. Even when we receive Him now, in the 21st century, we receive His history of almost 2,000 years ago when He was crucified and resurrected.

The transfer we have talked about relates to our *position*, where we are in God’s eyes. From His eternal perspective, we have been transferred from our place, or *position*, in Adam to our new *position* in Christ. As those “in Christ” we are united with Him in His experience of death and resurrection. Yet, we must go on to see that our *experience* is a different matter than our *position*. According to our position, we have died to sin and have been made alive together with Christ. But according to our experience, our actual living, this surely is not always the case! We must have great confidence that Christ has done all of the work to get us out of Adam into Christ, yet a life of faith is needed in order to have this fact become evident in our living. We will explore this matter of faith in future lessons. In our Christian life, we will see again and again that this truth of our having been crucified with Him and raised with Him is essential to our being able to actually live in Christ. Therefore, it is very important that we meditate on the verses containing these spiritual truths.

LESSON 6

The Totality of Our Death and Resurrection

Here we wish to point out the totality of our personal identification with Christ. This identification impacts our understanding of the Christian life. Let us begin with some quotes from Paul's writings. I have inserted some commentary in brackets in order to highlight a point.

"I [the old I] have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I [the old I] who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I [the new I] now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me." (Gal. 2:20)

This verse shows us that the old Paul, all that he was in the flesh, was put to death with Christ. The new life that Paul is living is the life Paul received in his resurrection with Christ, and it consists of Christ living in Paul. Paul is now living a new life, and the source of that life is not Paul, but Christ. This does not mean that Paul has lost his distinctive personality. It means that the faculties of his soul (his mind, emotion and will) are under the enlightenment, direction and empowerment of the Spirit of Christ, not the self-direction and self-empowerment of his old, natural life.

"For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." (Phil. 1:21)

This verse in Philippians again shows that Paul's living had a source that was just Christ.

"For you have died [the old you] and your life [the new you] is hidden with Christ in God. When **Christ, who is our life**, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory." (Col. 3:3-4)

The verses above comprise a statement of *positional* truth, describing our lives in Christ as seen from God's perspective. This passage makes it clear that the entire old Adamic life of ours has died with Christ, and now Christ Himself is our very life. Christ is our life "positionally," and He can be our life in experience. Now note the following passage where Paul speaks of his experience.

For we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh [the natural life, the old I], although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more; circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. (Phil. 3:3-10)

In this passage we see that Paul did not put any confidence in the flesh, his natural life. His flesh here was “good” flesh, of a respected pedigree, well trained and well disciplined to do God’s will, as he understood it before conversion. But, Paul rejected all of that. His desire to be “found in Him” without his own righteousness, based upon his efforts, was a post conversion desire. Such a desire may represent how Paul wished to be found by the Lord at His return.

Paul knew that he should put away himself as a source for any goodness, and trust Christ on a minute by minute basis to be a supply to him for practical righteous living. Paul rejected himself as a source of living. His goal was to be fully conformed to Christ’s death (a complete end to the old I), in order to attain to a special resurrection reward.

Here is an example that shows us the mistakes believers can make in trying to live the Christian life. Let’s say that a teenage girl gets saved. As she seeks the Lord she will begin to realize that there are certain things in her life that displease the Lord. For instance, maybe she is not very self-disciplined and so she doesn’t get her school work done until the last minute. Perhaps she is also sloppy in the way she keeps her room and she realizes that this is not godly. On the other hand, suppose she is a kind person, who has a heart to help others and take care of abandoned animals.

The young girl’s natural thought will be that God wants her to improve on the “bad” areas of her life, like self-discipline and sloppiness, but she is “okay” on matters of kindness and mercy. Therefore, she may pray, “Lord, help me to be more disciplined.” She may have some measure of success since she is conscious of the need to “improve,” but then she may slip back into her old ways again, leading her once again to pray for the Lord’s “help” to improve herself.

The girl does not understand the Christian life at all. The Lord does not want to improve our old self. Nor does the Lord approve of the “good” old self. All that we were in Adam, our entire old self, according to God’s evaluation, needed to be judged, condemned with Christ on the cross. God only desires to see the new creation we are in Christ lived out. This new creation is Christ Himself, living in me as my life source. You and I are to be just branches in Christ the vine, drawing upon Him for everything.

Therefore, when an impatient person prays, “Lord, help me to be patient,” he prays a prayer that has no basis in Scriptural truth. Instead, the person should pray, “Lord, thank you that the old impatient me was crucified with you. Now, Lord Jesus, I take You by faith as my patience. I have died and now You are my life. Hallelujah! I do not have to improve or do anything except to trust in You as my very life and all that I need.” In the same way, we should reject any reliance upon our good points (“put no confidence in the flesh,” Phil. 3:3), but instead seek to take the living Christ as all of our ability and strength.

The crux of the matter is the **source** of our living. God’s plan and way was to judge and crucify all that we were in Adam and to replace that with Christ. The old life is just us as the source. The new life is just Christ as the source of our living.

Whenever we try to live the Christian life by obeying God from ourselves, or whenever we do not fully agree to the death of the old life in order to take Christ alone as our source, we frustrate the flow of God’s enlivening grace towards us to live that life. Immediately after Gal. 2:20, Paul declares that, “I do not nullify the grace of God” (Gal. 2:21). In the preceding verses Paul stated that he had died to the Law (involving man’s effort to obey God), and that he had been crucified

with Christ and now Christ lived in him. Based upon such a practice, Paul could state that he “did not nullify God’s grace.”

We must place our trust in the truth that our old man was crucified and brought to an end before God. This implies that we agree to ourselves being put to death, even all that we were naturally in our Adamic life. By such a trust and agreement we open the way for the Spirit to put things to death in us in our daily walk (Rom. 8:13). More will be said about the details of this matter later. At the same time, we must also place our faith in God’s resurrection work. We have been raised with Christ to “walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). We cannot trust our feelings. We must place our faith in the word of God.

LESSON 7

Living the Identification Truths – A Walk of Faith

Our position in Christ and our experience are two different matters. We must understand this clearly and not confuse the two. Christian teachers today are still confusing the two, which leads to misunderstanding concerning the believer's walk. Our position relates to spiritual facts that are true in the spiritual realm before God. These positional truths show us our victorious position in Christ. Because of our position "in Christ," we share in all that He accomplished for us in His death and resurrection. By sharing in His death we are "dead to sin," which means our relationship to sin has changed. We are no longer under sin as a master, compelling us to commit sins. According to the spiritual fact of our position "in Christ," we have also been raised up with Christ and now, like Him, we are "alive to God," to please Him and do His will. These facts are absolutely true according to the spiritual realm (Rom. 6:1-11). However, these facts are not necessarily true at all of our daily experience. **The challenge to the believer is to bring these spiritual facts into his daily experience by a walk of faith.**

This arrangement of two realms, position and experience, may seem complicated, but this is God's way. By virtue of this arrangement, the overcoming life requires a seeking heart and a living faith. We dare not think that our victorious position is something that is automatically translated into every believer's experience. Such an expectation will cause confusion and disappointment. On the other hand, we must not think that the experience of our victorious position is unattainable. Christ won a great victory for us over sin, the world and the devil. This victory was accomplished through His death on the cross and His powerful resurrection from the dead. It is God's intention that every believer should learn how to walk in this victory. Note the following verses which speak directly of the victory available for believers.

"But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place." (2 Cor. 2:14)

This verse uses the metaphor of a conquering Roman general in a triumphal procession in Rome. The procession would include both the general's army and the captured enemies. Paul here pictures himself as one of the general's officers who was led along in the general's victory. In the same way, we can be led by God in the victory which Christ accomplished.

"But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 15:57)

Although the context of this verse is about the ultimate victory over death, which will be manifested in a future age, the principle of the believer sharing in the victory won by Christ is evident. Although we will share the aspect of His victory over physical death in the future, we can share His victory now over sin and the world. This victory is available to every believer in Christ. God gives us this victory through Christ, but we must learn to walk in it by faith.

Look at the verses in the table at the end of this lesson. The verses under "Our Position" tell us that our old man has been crucified and now (through resurrection with Him) Christ is our life. Yet, the other column, relating to our experience, tells us that we must put certain things within us to death. So, we see that the truth of our position must be worked out in our experience; it is not automatic.

The victorious life requires that what is true of us in our position must be transferred into the realm of our experience. So, what is involved in this transfer? It seems that there are four basic things involved. These four items are our seeking after God, the word of God, faith, and the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps some would include our seeking after God in the matter of faith, and this may be so. I have indicated this matter of seeking separately because I do not want believers to think that "faith" is just some kind of mental exercise in believing the word. In Hebrews chapter eleven, the great chapter on faith, consider what verse six says: "But without faith it is impossible to please him; for he that **cometh to God** must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that **diligently seek him**" (Heb. 11:6, KJV). The context of this verse concerns the lives of those who demonstrated living by faith. Here it seems that such a living by faith is explained in this verse as including both belief and a seeking after God. "Seeking God" means seeking to contact Him, know Him and obey Him. Regarding this matter of seeking, I think it is safe to say that no one has consistently lived the victorious life unless he was truly seeking the Lord.

Fact – Faith - Experience

Now, putting aside for the present the matter of seeking the Lord, let us look at the factors of the word, faith, and the Holy Spirit. Many teachers have illustrated the reality of the believer's experience as a train of "fact – faith - feelings." These teachers point out that the engine (the first car in the train) is the word of God (fact), faith is the middle car, and feelings is the last car. The word of God is absolute truth, so we take what it says as "Fact." In this "train" of Christian experience, the word must come first, then our faith in that word, and, as a result, feelings may follow. If we look for some type of feelings first we will fail. "Feelings" would be emotions or sensations. Actually, what should be the final car of this train of Christian experience is not "feelings," but **experience of the Holy Spirit**. We must place our faith, our full trust, in what the word says, and then experience will follow. Actually, when the stage of experience is realized, it is just the operation of the Holy Spirit in our living.

So, we must start with our trust in what the word declares, and this means we must disregard our feelings, or what seems to be our experience contrary to the word. The Bible says: "for we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7, KJV). The term "walk" here means to have our conduct, our experience of living. We must not put our belief in what *appears* to be our situation. No, instead we disregard what seems to be true to our senses and the evidence presented to our mind, and instead, we place our trust in what His word says about us and our situation. We must believe that God's word is absolutely trustworthy.

This principle of "Fact – Faith – Experience" applies to many aspects of our Christian experience. In this lesson we are simply limiting the application of this principle to our experience of the identification truths - those "facts" concerning our participation in Christ's death and resurrection.

If we look at God's word carefully, we will see that there are passages which show us that the experience of victory is based upon our position of victory in Christ. So, the truth (fact) of our position in Christ is transferred into our experience by our faith in the truth. The crucial passage of Rom.6:1-10 declares the spiritual facts of our sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ. Then, verse 11 calls for us to count these facts to be true of us (faith). As we believe verse 11, then we can act on our faith in verses 12 and 13. Verse 12 calls for us to deny sin's reign in our

lives, based on the spiritual fact that we have died to sin. Verse 13 calls for us to present ourselves to God for obedience, based upon the spiritual fact that we are now alive to God. Verses 12 and 13 speak of our faith and our experience.

To recap, Rom. 6:1-10 generally speak of our position in Christ (our union with Him in His death and resurrection), the spiritual facts. These facts comprise the first car in the train. Then verse 11 calls us to place our faith in the foregoing facts. So, verse 11 is the middle train car of faith. Then verses 12 and 13 touch our experience, the outworking of the spiritual facts in our lives. Yet, even verses 12 and 13 ask us to act by faith. When we follow verses 12 and 13 in faith, then the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, empowering us to say “no” to sin and to yield to God in obedience. Thus, verses 12 and 13 help us enter into experience and are the final car in the train. Feelings, or sensations, will follow from time to time as we use our faith. Feelings, however, are never consistent, nor are they a consistent result of faith. God does not want us to seek after feelings or depend upon them for confirmation of our walk of faith. He does, however, want us to have real experience of the Holy Spirit. He calls us to always walk in the way of faith – trusting fully in Him and His word, and acting upon His word. If do we this, then the Holy Spirit becomes real in our experience.

“Even so consider [count it to be true] yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Rom. 6:11)

“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts,” (Rom. 6:12)

“and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.” (Rom. 6:13)

It is important to notice from the verses above that when we place our trust in these identification truths we are also “agreeing” with God to be dead to sin and alive to Him. That is, we are in agreement to fully die to the self-life, all that we were in Adam, and now to live to God in full obedience to Him. When we “consider” ourselves to be dead to sin, we not only “believe” this fact, but we are agreeing for it to be carried out in our lives. If we do not have the intention to fully die to self and live fully to God, then the “Fact – Faith – Experience” train will not move forward. We will not have the experience of the Holy Spirit working Christ’s victory in our lives. The root of faith must produce the fruit of obedience. If we count on (have faith in) the fact of our participation in Christ’s death and resurrection to be true, we must do so with an attitude that we choose to experience a life lived to God, a life characterized by obedience, not sin.

Walking by faith

We see how vital it is to steadfastly focus upon God’s word, especially the truths of our position in Christ, in order to live an overcoming Christian life. In our experience of this, we will find that there is a spiritual struggle here. This struggle exists because “the flesh” is still with us. We are very conscious of the sin nature within us and our past failures, and the presence of sin makes it seem that we cannot live a life of obedience. The old nature within seems so powerful and the pull of sin upon us seems so overwhelming at times. However, as we maintain our steadfastness of belief in the fact of our participation in Christ’s death and resurrection, we find that we can “stand still and see the salvation of the Lord” (Ex. 14:13, KJV). This means that as we stand upon God’s word in faith, fully dependent upon Him and seeking Him, then the Holy Spirit works

in us death and resurrection experience. In this way, the Holy Spirit gives us the victory that is in Christ.

In looking at the table at the end of the lesson, you can see that the Spirit is involved in putting certain things to death within us. We, however, are also involved. Our choices and our actions work together with the Spirit. The verses in the table show that we must put to death the members of our body (being tempted to sin) and the deeds of our body - those sinful deeds that flow out of the dominion of sin. Yet, we do all this by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is brought in through our faith in God and His word. Paul, in contrasting the way of the Law in obeying God to the way of grace, emphasizes this relationship between the Holy Spirit and faith, as seen in the following verses:

This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? . . . Does He then who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal. 3:2-3, 5) For we through the Spirit, by faith, are awaiting the hope of righteousness. (Gal. 5:5)

Let's look at an actual experience to see how these ideas work out. Suppose you are tempted to sin in a certain way. The sinful lusts within you have been stirred up and are pulling you towards a sinful action (see James 1:13-15). What should you do? It is at this point that you must turn your inner being towards God and come forward to Him in your spirit. At the same time, you may begin confessing a useful identification truth in prayer to Him. You may pray, for instance, "Thank you, Jesus, that I was crucified with you on the cross (Rom. 6:6). Now, Lord, it is no longer the old I who is living, but you are living in me as my very life (Gal. 2:20). You are my sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30). I am trusting in You as my righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30)."

There will be an inward struggle as the sinful impulses pull at you, even while you are praying. This "evidence" (which contradicts faith) that you are still a sinful person and that you will end up sinning, must be disregarded as you appropriate the truth of who you are in Christ, and what He is to you. The *presence* of sin will be there. But, our job is to come forward to the Lord for His grace and power (Heb. 4:16). We must be in utter dependence upon Him. As we seek Him in spirit and stand upon the truth of His word, then the Holy Spirit begins to put to death the rising power of the sinful desire within us, and at the same time we feel strengthened to turn away from sin's demand and choose obedience to God.

Will there be failures along the way? Yes, we are still learning and are still in the unredeemed body where we may succumb to temptation and failure. Sometimes our heart is not pure; we may secretly love the sin and not desire victory that badly. We may feel cold towards the Lord at the time of temptation.

Another problem is that we may unwittingly try to combat the sin in the energy of our own effort, without full dependence upon the Lord. We will talk about this matter in future lessons. Suffice it to say for now that this is one of our biggest reasons for failure, and it takes most believers years to be weaned from this defeating habit. Also, if we are not spending time in the word of God, feeding our faith and our spiritual life, then we will be weak in faith (Matt. 4:4, Rom. 10:17).

We must realize that our “reckoning” (Rom. 6:11) of ourselves to be dead to sin is based upon our “knowing” that our old man was crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6). To know that we have been crucified with him requires some spiritual revelation. This may come in different ways to different believers, but this knowing usually comes only after some time of seeking the Lord for truth and victory. Dwelling on the identification truths, going over and over them, even daily, strengthens our faith in their reality. Once we “know” that we were crucified with Him (and have been raised to walk in newness of life) it is easier to apply faith to that fact in the midst of the battle.

With the thoughts in the preceding paragraph in mind, we need to conclude that there is the matter of time involved in the development and improvement of our experience. The victorious life is progressive in its manifestation. If we continue to seek the Lord and follow the principles of the overcoming life, victory will unfold in greater and greater measure. Some truths that are appropriated by us through faith may actually take a long time to become fully manifested in our experience.

Finally, I would again emphasize that our overcoming *experience* is based upon our *position*. If you read the New Testament admonitions concerning putting sin to death within us, or putting on the new man, you will usually find that these commands are preceded by some mention of spiritual fact (*positional truth*). For instance, take a look at Col. 3:1-11. The practical instructions of dealing with certain sins in the verses in the latter portion of this passage are based upon the truth of our position in verses 1-4. Verse five begins with a “therefore,” indicating that our dealing with sins has its basis and ability rooted in *positional truth*. So, we see that faith in our position, regardless of our feeling, is critical in the matter of victory.

Let us memorize and meditate upon those truths that are true of us in Christ. Let us seek after God and His holiness. Let us forget about and disregard the “evidence” of the inward presence of sin and all of our failures! Let us not try to live the Christian life in our energy, but let us stand upon the word of God regarding the truth of who we are in Christ and what has happened to us in Christ. Then, the experience of Christ living within us will grow and blossom.

OUR POSITION (Spiritual fact)	OUR EXPERIENCE (Realization of spiritual fact)
“Knowing this, that our old self [man] was crucified with Him . . . ” (Rom. 6:6a)	“ if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom. 8:13b)
“For you died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory” (Col. 3:3-4, NKJV)	“Therefore, put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5, NKJV)
“And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and its desires” (Gal. 5:24, NKJV)	“if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom. 8:13b, NKJV)
“and in Him you were also circumcised with a	“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not

<p>circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11)</p>	<p>carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16)</p>
<p>“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal. 3:27)</p>	<p>“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regards to its lusts” (Rom. 13:14)</p>

LESSON 8

Freedom from Law

The overcoming Christian life involves not only deliverance from sin, but also deliverance from God's law. In fact, to be freed from sin, we must also be freed from law. Consider this verse: "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14).

To be victorious in our Christian life, we must learn to abandon the principle of law and live by the principle of grace. What do I mean by the "principle of law" and the "principle of grace"? This is a very important question, and we will answer it in due course. Let us first consider some Scriptures about the law so that we can put it in perspective for the New Testament believer.

The law was God's economy until Christ came

"For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ." (Jn. 1:17)

"The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since then the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached, and every one is forcing his way into it." (Lk. 16:16)

"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." (Rom. 10:4)

"For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand, there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God." (Heb. 7:18-19)

The work of the law

"Because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). The work of the law is to reveal man's sinfulness to him.

The problem of the law

"The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law." (1 Cor. 15:56)

"But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died." (Rom. 7:8-9)

"Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been able to give life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law" (Gal. 3:21). The law could not give life. A certain life (Christ's life) is needed to live out a righteous living acceptable to God.

"So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Therefore, did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin." (Rom. 7:12-14)

The Law in itself is not a problem; it is righteous and good. However, when it is paired with the fallen flesh, it simply brings out man's sinfulness. Therefore, for man to utilize the law as a way to live is a problem.

How to properly use the law today

"But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous man, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching"(1 Tim. 1:8-10). Today, the law is to be used for sinners, not the righteous (Christians), in order to show them their sinfulness.

The purpose of the law

"Therefore, the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24). The law puts sinners under condemnation, thus making them realize their need of a Savior.

The law was only a shadow; it's reality is with Christ in the New Testament

"For the law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things." (Heb. 10:1)

"Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day – things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ." (Col. 2:16-17)

The things of the law, including all of its regulations and commandments, were only a shadow of what is realized in Christ. For instance, dietary regulations were required by the law in Leviticus 11 in order "to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean" (Lev. 11:47). When Christ came, however, he explained that what defiles a man is not what enters into him as food, but what is within man's evil heart and proceeds out of him (things like evil thoughts, coveting and slander – see Mk. 7:14-23). Therefore, in the New Testament era, eating or not eating certain foods does not commend us to God (1 Cor. 8:8).

The Old Testament dietary laws were designed to be in force only until the new covenant was enacted (Heb. 9:10). All foods are now considered as clean with regard to our holiness before God (Rom. 14:14, 20; 1 Tim. 4:3-5). The New Testament reality of what makes a distinction between what is clean and unclean is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts judging what is unclean within (Rom. 8:13-15; Gal. 5:17-18; Col. 3:5-9; Heb. 4:12-13).

Another example of the regulations of the law being fulfilled in Christ would be the requirement for circumcision. The reality of circumcision (a cutting off of the flesh) is the work of Christ on the cross in cutting off the entire sinful flesh of man (Col. 2:11). This reality is to be applied daily and inwardly to our lives (Rom. 2:29).

Also, there are no longer any special days (such as the Sabbaths or feasts) for observance, as required of the Jews in the Old Testament (Lev. 23). These things comprise a shadow of which Christ Himself is the reality (1 Cor. 5:7-8; Col. 2:16-17). When Paul wrote his letter to the

Galatians, his entire burden was to release them from the bondage of the way of the law into the freedom of grace. Concerning the keeping of days, he wrote:

But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? **You observe days and months and seasons and year.** I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. (Gal. 4:9-11)

The believer's relationship to the law

"Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God." (Rom. 7:4)

"But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter." (Rom. 7:6)

"For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God." (Gal. 2:19)

Before regeneration, while living in the old "I," we were bound to the law. As sinners, that law condemned us to death. When we accepted Christ and were identified with Him in death, then we were released from the law. We were raised up with Him to serve God, not according to law with the effort of the flesh, but according to a new life in our spirit, where we are joined to Christ (1 Cor. 6:17). As believers, our relationship to the law is totally over; we have died to the law and we have been released from it!

Think about those believers in the early days of the church. They did not have an entire Bible as we do now. The Scriptures then consisted of the Old Testament. That is what they looked to as God's word. Of course, as different assemblies received letters from the apostles they also rightly regarded them as God's inspired instructions. Yet, the application of the Old Testament commandments to gentile believers became a matter of debate within the church and a matter of learning from God (the council in Acts 15 is a good example).

Eventually, this matter of the law became clear through God's revelation in the Epistles, especially the letters of Paul and the Epistle to the Hebrews. As we can see from the many clear statements of Scripture above, the New Testament believer is not under the law and it is not intended for him.

There is more than one aspect of this matter of not being under the law. Firstly, it should be understood from the passages noted above, that the regulations and commandments of the Old Testament do not directly apply to believers today. Even those believers who uphold the "Ten Commandments" as rules for their living are in error. These rules were for the Jews of the Old Testament era, not for the New Testament believer. This does not mean that God does not use the Old Testament to speak to Christians concerning our living, or concerning lessons for the Christian life. He most certainly does use them (Matt. 4:4; Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 4:12). However, the Old Testament is not a rule book to be meticulously obeyed.

A second and more fundamental aspect of being “under law” concerns the efforts and ability of the believer to carry out righteous requirements that do apply to him. This aspect is what is really critical in experiencing freedom from the law. This is seen in Paul’s struggle with obedience in Romans chapter seven, a struggle which took place after he became a Christian.

The issue in Romans seven concerns our ability to obey God’s requirements of us. Paul used his struggle with covetousness as an example of this problem. Paul understood that the Old Testament prohibition against covetousness still applied to him morally as a New Testament believer (Mk. 7:22; Lk. 12:15; Col. 3:5). The problem was that he tried to carry out a commandment by the power of his natural ability, the strength of the old “I.” His inner consciousness agreed with the moral precept and felt it should be followed. However, he discovered that as he set out to obey God, a problem arose. That problem was the “law of sin” in the members of his body (Rom. 7:23).

Whenever Paul set out to obey God, according to a righteous commandment, sin became alive within him (Rom. 7:9), and he found himself unable to counteract the force of sin within him. This sinful force eventually drove him to do the very thing he did not want to do (Rom. 7:14-15, 19). Please read Romans 7:7-25 to get a clear view of Paul’s struggle. This aspect of being “under law”, namely our inability to obey God’s demands of us, is the crux of the problem in this matter of being “freed from the law.”

In order to live the overcoming life, the believer must be freed from the law. But, the principle of being “under law” involves much more than just not applying the Old Testament rules to us today. To be “under law” means that our relationship with God is focused upon our responsibility to obey a set of commandments in order to be acceptable to Him. Such a focus sets into motion a self-effort to obey the commandments. This self-effort in turn leads to failure, because the power of indwelling sin is triggered by such self-effort. This is exactly the experience of which Paul wrote in Romans seven.

This same theme of being freed from the law is very evident in Paul’s letter to the Galatians (note Gal. 5:1, where the “yoke of slavery” denotes the covenant of Law – see Gal. 4:24). In Galatians we again see that the “flesh”, man’s fallen self, is paired with the “works of the Law” (Gal. 2:16; 3:2-5). Thus, the Scripture always links man’s self-effort with law.

The principle of law involves man living to a set of rules to be obeyed. Romans 7:1-6 tells us that our old man, the flesh, was strongly bound under the law. This means that the natural, unregenerated life lives to commandments in order to be righteous before God. The natural man serves God according to “the letter.” Paul states the matter plainly in Romans 7:6: “But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit, and not in oldness of the letter.”

Our freedom from law means that we are not under obligation to keep a set of commandments. Our relationship with God is not characterized by a set of rules. Instead, we are under grace.

We will explore the principle of grace in detail in the next lesson. As an introduction, let me say that living under grace means living out our new life in Christ by the supply, power and direction of the Holy Spirit. Such a living, which is according to the law (or principle) of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, fulfills all of the righteousness of God’s Law (Rom. 8:2, 4). We are no longer under the demand of the law, requiring us to keep it, but we are under the rule and supply of the Spirit, whose life lives righteously. Grace is not a way of rules; it is the way of God’s life.

Does this mean that there are no “commandments” for the New Testament believer? Does this mean we are “antinomian” – against all laws and commandments, perhaps even allowing for unrestrained, sinful living? No. However, Christians must understand that the demands and commandments of God are realized by us and carried out in our lives in a different way than the way of law, a legal principle. One verse that shows this well is 1 Corinthians 9:21, where Paul was speaking of his way of dealing with unbelievers in order to win them to Christ: “to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law” (1 Cor. 9:21). We have been released from a set of rules that we must keep, but we are living by the law of Christ, the life principle of the person of God’s Son.

LESSON 9

Under Grace

This lesson is a continuation of the teaching under Lesson Eight, Freedom From the Law. Believers are now freed from living by law, which means living by a legal principle. If we are to be overcomers, it is imperative that we have a clear understanding of what it means to be freed from the law, yet under grace. Some key concepts regarding this topic are covered below.

Law and living to law versus grace and living to God

Being “under law” involves man’s efforts to carry out God’s will, which is specified in definite commandments. Through these commandments, man is given knowledge of right and wrong and expected to do the right. Man attempts to carry out these commands by means of his own energy and ability (the “flesh”).

A person “under law” lives to the law, serves the law, and is bound to the law (Rom. 7:2, 4, 6). His focus is upon that law, and his righteousness before God is dependent upon his carrying out of those commandments. The “law” characterizes the Old Testament relationship of man to God.

Being “under grace” involves the living union of the believer with Christ by means of the supply of the Holy Spirit. A person living under grace is receiving and experiencing Christ as his life and life supply (1 Cor. 15:10; Gal. 2:20-21; 5:4). The believer experiencing grace is focused upon the living person of Christ. He longs for Christ and seeks after Christ in his spirit (1 Cor. 6:17). Such a person has an inner reaching out to Christ in a very dependent, trustful and needful way.

By experiencing Christ as his very life, the believer then serves God in his spirit, not by outward law keeping (Rom. 1:9; 7:6). The believer living under grace is spontaneously righteous in his living before God by the operation of Christ’s life (Rom. 8:2, 4). “Grace” characterizes the New Testament relationship of man to God. Paul testified that, “I have died to the Law, that I might live to God” (Gal. 2:19).

The law and independence versus grace and dependence

The legal principle requires man to carry out commandments. A person living under law must know the law and then must obey it. So, man’s knowledge and man’s effort are both required. This type of situation fosters man’s independence from God. Can you see in this what seems to have been typified by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden? To live by such knowledge simply means that if one only knows what to do then one can do it. Thus man can be righteous by his own efforts and is independent from God.

As an illustration, imagine a nine year old girl who decides that she is now going to be independent in her living. In her independent attitude, she has decided she knows how to take care of her own living and is able to do so. When she wakes up in the morning, her independence means she will no longer look to her parents for her living. So, she will have to find her own breakfast, instead of it being prepared by her mother. Next, she will have to find a way to keep warm and be sheltered from the weather, since she has decided not to depend upon her

parents. She moves outside and begins to discover the challenges and discomforts of such a decision. As the day goes on, she understands more and more how difficult it is for a nine year old girl to take care of herself. Just as she was designed to be under the care and nurture of her parents, so man was designed to live by the supply of God Himself.

In contrast to the legal principle, the tree of life signifies complete dependence upon God for one's very life. It shows that man has no life unless he comes to that tree and partakes of it. Jesus is the tree of life for us today. Unless we come to Him and take grace from Him, we have no life, no way to do anything.

The way of grace is one of utter dependence upon God. No matter how much knowledge we may have, that will never enable us to live righteously before God. When we live under grace, we live in a moment by moment dependence upon Him. As we do, God supplies us with His Spirit (Gal. 3:5; Phil. 1:19). Jesus said: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5).

Grace is much more than unmerited favor

The New Testament word for grace is *charis* (Strong's #5485). Although its meaning is popularly taught as "unmerited favor," the meaning of the word takes on other characteristics in many New Testament passages. I agree that we have been saved by grace, which grace includes God's unmerited favor. Yet, our present experience of living under grace, a living wherein we are freed from the dominion of sin and from the yoke of the law (Rom. 6:14; Gal. 5:1, 4), includes much more than being in a state of God's favor. As we can see from the following passages, such a "grace living" points to our living union with the risen Christ.

"For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace" (Jn. 1:16). This verse speaks of a receiving of Christ's fullness, something of His person, in the way of "grace upon grace," that is, experience upon experience.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you" (Rom. 16:20). This verse is experiential. Grace here speaks of a supply of Christ's presence and empowerment.

"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). Here is Paul's testimony that the life he lived and the work he was able to accomplish was not of himself, but of God. Here the term grace simply stands for the experience and power of the Holy Spirit in Paul's life. The aspect of Christ's life that is emphasized in this passage is His strength for service.

"For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you" (2 Cor. 1:12). The credit for Paul's uplifted human conduct is here given to "grace," which must mean the power of the life of Christ. The aspect of Christ's life that is emphasized in this verse is His holiness.

"And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Cor. 12:9). Here we see that grace is nothing less than the power of Christ in our lives.

The aspect of Christ's life that is emphasized in this verse is Christ's ability to overcome the negative circumstances in human experience that tend to depress and overwhelm us. Praise God that we do not have to be defeated by the tribulations of this world!

"The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you" (2 Tim. 4:22). I believe these two sentences speak of the same thing.

"Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). This wonderful verse shows us that grace is something subjective, dispensed to us from God Himself on the throne. Such grace enables us to overcome in the time of our need. According to the context, the "time of need" would indicate our need for strength to be victorious when tempted or tested. This grace must be the supply of God's Spirit dispensed to us (see Gal. 3:5).

"Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28, KJV). It is by the power of God's grace, the enabling of His Spirit, that we can serve God acceptably.

There are other passages showing the use of the term "grace" as pointing to the realization of our union with Christ, through the agency of the Holy Spirit. You may want to research this more with your concordance.

The Old Testament contrasted with the New Testament

In our comparison of "under law" and "under grace" it will be instructive to see how the old and new covenants are contrasted in Scripture.

For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. For finding fault with them, He says, "Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the House of Judah; not like the covenant which I made with their fathers, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in My covenant, and I did not care for them, says the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them upon their hearts. And I will be their God and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen, and everyone his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." (Heb. 8:7-12)

Here the contrast of the two covenants with Israel is seen. However, the Gentile believers already share this promise of the new covenant. We are sharers in it as children of promise (Rom. 9:4-8; Gal. 4:24-28). It was established with the church at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:26-29).

The epistle to the Hebrews was written to contrast the old way of Judaism with the new way, which God has inaugurated through Christ's sacrifice. The old covenant of the Law consisted of

the written tablets of commandments, which God's people were supposed to keep. The Law is something **external**. The Jews were required to obey those commandments written in stone. But, the new covenant is something internal. Now, the laws of God are written into our minds and upon our hearts. He has imparted the laws of His ways into our being!

This contrast cannot be overstated. It is further elucidated by the declaration in the passage quoted above that there will no longer be the need to teach others to know the Lord (by the written commandments), because now, under the new covenant, each believer has an innate ability to know God Himself. God has imparted Himself into us, and His laws have been inscribed upon our inward being. Of course, we grow in this experience of learning His inward laws as we grow in Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).

In our contrast of "under law" and "under grace" we used the contrasting terms of independence and dependence. Now, we must add to these two more very important terms: external (going with law), and internal (going with grace).

LESSON 10

Under Grace (continued)

In our study of being freed from the law and being under grace, we must consider the role of commandments and injunctions in God's written Word. Throughout Christian history some Christian teachers have been alarmed at those believers who say that the "law" does not apply to them. These teachers were alarmed because they feared that being "without law" meant that such believers would disregard Biblical commandments and hence be prone to live in sin.

Historically, there may have been some Christians who distorted the concept of freedom from the law in such a way as to permit them to live ungodly lives. But, rightly understood, freedom from the law does not entail a disregard for Biblical commands.

A life under grace does not mean we are free to live however we wish. It does mean, however, that the way we live that life, and the way we realize and keep God's commandments is fundamentally different than the way of being "under the law."

Remember that being "under law" involves living to a set of external commandments by means of my own ability. It is the way of independence. The way of grace entails a living under the supply and direction of the Holy Spirit. In that way, I am dependent upon God for everything - to show me His will and to supply me with His power to do His will - all by His inward working in my heart.

Jesus as a pattern

If we are to be followers of Christ, we must look to the pattern He set. While living on the earth Jesus laid aside His position in glory and assumed the position of a man dependent upon God (Phil. 2:5-8). The Bible clearly tells us that Jesus lived in obedience to God's will and God's commandments. How He lived that life is instructive. Let us look at some Scriptures.

"I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." (Jn. 5:30)

"For I do not speak on My own initiative [*lit.*, of myself], but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak." (Jn. 12:49)

"But that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, even so I do. Arise, let us go from here." (Jn. 14:31)

"If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love." (Jn. 15:10)

The last verse cited shows that we are to keep the Lord's commandments, just as He did the commandments of His Father. Yet, notice that the commandments the Lord kept were ones He realized in His intimate living relationship with His Father. In John 12:49 Jesus states that it is "the Father Himself who . . . has given Me commandment." This construction in the Greek portrays an emphasis on the Father being personally involved in the giving of commandments to Jesus.

"Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works." (Jn. 14:10)

This last verse shows us even more. Not only is the Father personally involved in giving Jesus direction, but the Father is living in Him to carry out the works He commands! I like the way this same verse reads in the Williams translation: "Do you not believe that I am in union with the Father and that the Father is in union with me? I am not saying these things on my own authority, but the Father who always remains in union with me is doing these things Himself" (Jn. 14:10, Williams). This is dependence! This is supply! This is grace! Yes, even Jesus, in His dependent position as a man, needed grace. Note the following verse:

"But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that **by the grace of God** He might taste death for everyone." (Heb. 2:9)

Commandments and the overcoming Christian

The proper Christian life does involve doing the will of God and keeping His commandments. This is unarguable from Scripture (Jn. 14:15; 1 Cor. 7:19; 1 Pet. 4:2; 1 Jn. 2:3-4; 3:22, 24). But, we are not as those "under law," rather we have died to law that we might be joined to another, to Christ, so that in union with Him we might bear fruit to God (Rom. 7:4).

We must understand that for the believer the keeping of God's commandments is never something apart from the working of God's life in us. To keep the law requires the effort of man's flesh. The believer's keeping of God's commandments is something altogether in our spirit, a realm where we are experiencing oneness with Christ (Rom. 1:9; 7:6; 1 Cor. 6:17).

The written commandments of God in the Bible reflect the will of God, the character of God and the ways of God. Thus, the commands and principles of God in the Bible match God Himself. The outward word in our hands is thus in harmony with the living Word (Jn. 1:1; Rev. 19:13) who dwells within. Therefore, the normal Christian experience is that the Holy Spirit within will often speak to us, direct us, correct us, warn us, and rebuke us with passages and principles from His holy word. Our seeking is after God Himself, but we often meet Him by means of His Spirit-directed and Spirit-laden word (Jn. 6:63).

The word of God is indeed the "language" which the Holy Spirit can use to speak to us directly, personally and exactly as is needed in a particular situation. Let us consider some verses that confirm this.

"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." (2 Tim. 3:16)

"For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Heb. 4:12)

"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you." (Jn. 14:26)

"And as for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for any one to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him." (1 Jn. 2:27)

Perhaps we could use other verses, but these four taken together show us how God works in us with His words, which includes His commandments. The first verse shows us how the Scripture can be useful for all kinds of direction and understanding in the Christian life. Then, the next verse from Hebrews tells us that such Scripture can be alive, piercing into our inner being to the spirit within, judging the very thoughts of our hearts.

In the verse from John we see how God the Holy Spirit can take what has been spoken before and bring it into our remembrance at the right moment. The strict interpretation of this verse, according to the context, involves the words of Christ to His disciples. No doubt, however, in application to our lives, the Holy Spirit often brings verses to our remembrance. Finally, we see that the "anointing," a term for the moving activity of the Holy Spirit within us, teaches us about all things, and as we respond in obedience to this moving teaching, we abide in the Lord.

No doubt the anointing will use Scripture to speak to us in many cases, as we have seen from the other verses. The Bible is the "language" which the Holy Spirit often uses to speak to us. Also, we may feel some inner forbidding or urging from the anointing within us, and we can often interpret these feelings in our spirit by the understanding of Scripture in our enlightened mind.

The word of God and the Spirit of God go hand in hand in the overcoming Christian life. If we have a heart truly seeking Him, which includes seeking to obey Him, then the Lord has a way to speak to us from His word. In this "speaking" there will be verses from His word which will make an impression upon us, and we will realize that God is requiring us to walk in accordance with those Scriptural injunctions.

Our experience

Some practical examples relating to our experience may underscore this matter of commandments not being discarded in the overcoming life, yet not being realized in the way of "law" but of "life."

Why does an overcoming Christian turn away from a sinful temptation? He does so because there is an inner forbidding, an inner aversion to sin that fights against the fallen flesh. "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh" (Gal. 5:17). The overcomer is not following a rule; he is experiencing a life within. Yet, he will be aware of the Biblical injunctions against sin, sometimes specifically brought to his remembrance at the time of temptation.

Why does an overcoming believer turn away from dwelling upon an advertisement for a new car and shun any strong desire for it? It is because there is something within him that shrinks back from loving that car, even the lifestyle of self-indulgence promoted by the advertising world. That something within him is the life of God that loves the Father instead of loving the things of this world (1 Jn. 2:15-17).

Why does an overcoming sister feel uncomfortable with very short hair or a short dress? It is not because of a rule, as is promoted in some legalistic congregations. Rather, it is because the life of God within her is repulsed by immodesty, or by looking like a man. It is repulsed by the self-assertiveness of the feminist movement. The overcoming sister has an inner desire to be under her husband's leadership. She also desires modesty before her Lord and before others. Sometimes the Lord will speak Scriptures to her in her spirit to remind her of His holy ways.

In the overcoming Christian life, the commandments of God are not carried out by will power, and the character of God is not achieved by outward imitation. These virtues are realized in us by the working of God Himself. Note the following verses as proof of this truth:

"So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." (Phil. 2:12-13)

"Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God." (2 Cor. 3:5)

“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world – our faith” (1 Jn. 5:3-4). What is born of God is our human spirit (Jn. 3:6; Heb. 12:9). Since our spirit contains the life of God, as we walk in the realm of our spirit through faith, keeping His commandments is not a burden because the life of God within carries out His will.

“Now the God of peace . . . equip **you** in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever, and ever. Amen.” (Heb. 13:20-21)

Living in spirit, freed from the Law

We are freed from the law, yet we maintain God’s righteousness in our living by living “according to the Spirit.”

“For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.” (Rom. 8:2-4)

“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law” (Gal. 5:18). Here we see that the believer is freed from the law when he is following the leading of the Holy Spirit within him. In other words, he is inwardly seeking after the Lord in his spirit, in order to be in union with Him, to know Him and to follow Him. As he seeks after Christ in this way, and follows the anointing of the Spirit within, he is out from under the Law. He is experiencing grace. What could be clearer? It is when we are practicing our spiritual union with Christ that we leave behind the law, with its potential for being a catalyst for sin. “For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace.” (Rom. 6:14)

“But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit [or spirit] and not in oldness of the letter.” (Rom. 7:6)

LESSON 11

Characteristics of the Overcomer – A Seeking Heart

I believe that looking at some characteristics of an overcomer's life will help us shape the attitudes of our heart. Let us not be discouraged if we do not feel that all of these traits fit us fully at this time. Yet, where we realize our shortcomings, let us open up to the Lord in prayer about them, sincerely inviting Him to work in our lives in these areas. And, let us come to the throne of grace, that we may receive grace to help us where we fall short.

This list of characteristics may not be complete, but these are the marks of victorious Christians that I sense are crucial. This list comes out of many years of observation, reading (the Bible and biographies) and personal experience. My prayer is that the things we discuss here will touch your heart and inspire you to reach higher.

A Seeking Heart

To my observation the most foundational characteristic is that of a seeking heart. It may well be that this trait overlaps some other traits, which we will mention. That is okay. The objective here is to see that what is at the core of the victorious believer is a heart that relentlessly pursues after God, and the things of God.

The overcomer is never satisfied with the status quo. He or she always wants to know God more deeply, to know His truth more accurately, to know His ways more fully, and to follow Him more exactly. While others may be satisfied with going to church on Sunday and reading the Bible at least a little during the week, the overcomer yearns for more fellowship in His presence, more feeding in His word, more real spiritual fellowship with others, and more fruit and reality in his life. The overcomer longs to see God work more in his life, and in the lives of those around him. Seekers of the Lord are not satisfied with what is taught and ministered in most churches today. They seek to learn more and to go deeper with God.

Let's be honest. Both according to the Bible and according to our experience, the overcomers are a minority among God's people. We will see this truth as we look at some passages on seeking the Lord. Only a few of the kings recorded in the historical books of the Old Testament seemed to really please the Lord, for at least part of their lives. Often, the Scripture describes them as seeking the Lord. We shall also see that the remnant that left the idolatry in the northern kingdom of Israel to return to Jerusalem for worship at God's altar, as well as the remnant that returned from Babylon to rebuild the temple, are both described as those who sought the Lord.

Here are some Biblical examples of those who sought the Lord:

And Asa did good and right in the sight of the Lord his God, for he removed the foreign altars and high places, tore down the sacred pillars, cut down the Asherim, and commanded Judah to seek the Lord God of their fathers and to observe the law and the commandment . . . And the kingdom was undisturbed under him. . . . Now the Spirit of God came on Azariah the son of Oded, and he went out to meet Asa and said unto him, "Listen to me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: the Lord is with you when you are with Him. And if you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you." . . . And they [Asa and all Judah and Benjamin] entered into the covenant to seek the Lord God of their fathers with all their heart and soul. (2 Chron. 14:2-4, 5b, 15:1-2, 12)

And the Lord was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the example of his father David's earlier days and did not seek the Baals, but sought the God of his father, followed His commandments, and did not act as Israel did. So the Lord established the kingdom in his control, and all Judah brought tribute to Jehoshaphat, and he had great riches and honor. (2 Chron. 17:3-5)

Jehoshaphat's example shows us that through seeking the Lord we can realize the truth concerning God's ways and then walk in that truth. The Lord honored this king's seeking, which included his desire to pursue God's will.

"O God, Thou art my God; I shall seek Thee earnestly; my soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee, in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Ps. 63:1). This is David's prayer in a psalm of David.

In another psalm we again see David earnestly seeking God: "When Thou didst say, 'Seek My face,' my heart said to Thee, 'Thy face, O Lord, I shall seek'" (Ps. 27:8). These verses show that an important part of seeking the Lord is seeking His presence. Such seeking is our reaching out to God from the depths of our spirit in order to be in a living spiritual union with Him. Psalm 105 tells us to "Seek the Lord and His strength; seek His face continually" (Ps. 105:4).

"So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes" (Dan. 9:3). This word is Daniel's testimony. Daniel's example shows us that there are some occasions in our lives when we need to seek the Lord with special prayers, and even fasting. The sackcloth and ashes signify a deep penitence, or an occasion of special solemnity.

For the Levites left their pasture lands and their property and came to Judah and Jerusalem, for Jeroboam and his sons had excluded them from serving as priests to the Lord. And he set up priests of his own for the high places, for the satyrs, and for the calves which he had made. And those from all the tribes of Israel who set their hearts to seek the Lord God of Israel, followed them to Jerusalem to sacrifice to the Lord God of their fathers. (2 Chron. 11:14-16)

The passage above speaks of the remnant of faithful Jews who left the idolatry in the northern kingdom under Jeroboam in order to worship at God's altar in Jerusalem. They overcame the degraded situation by leaving their lands behind in order to follow God's way of worship. Their seeking resulted in some radical action. Importantly, this passage shows us that we can set our hearts to seek the Lord. We believers should not be passive. This is most important - we can initiate our seeking of the Lord.

"And the sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to join them, to seek the Lord God of Israel, ate the Passover." (Ezra 6:21)

The quote from Ezra above describes another very important remnant among God's people. Because of their disobedience, the Jews in Judah were captured and led into captivity in Babylon, starting about 604 B. C. This captivity was prophesied to last seventy years (Jer. 25:11-12).

When the seventy years were up, Cyrus, king of Persia, decreed that the Jews could return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1-3). However, only a remnant of the Jews returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra and others. Most of the Jews stayed in Babylon because they had accumulated lands and possessions and did not want to leave them. It was only a minority of God's people, who really desired to seek the Lord, who returned to God's

chosen city to rebuild His temple. These were the overcomers of their day, who were obedient in carrying out God's plan with the temple.

The reward of the seekers

God has a special reward for the real seekers after Him. In Psalm 24 below, note the victorious life, and the reward, of the seeker.

Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands, and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation. This is Jacob, the generation of those who seek Him, who seek Your face. Selah. (Ps. 24: 3-6, NKJV).

A striking New Testament verse concerning the reward for the seeker is Hebrews 11:6: "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6, KJV).

Perhaps the most stirring verse of all the promises for the seeker is that he will find God Himself. "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13). If you look at the context of this verse you will discover that God was speaking to the Jews who were taken captive into Babylon. He was promising them that when the seventy years of captivity were up, He would bring back to Jerusalem those who sought Him with all of their hearts. As we saw in the passage from Ezra, this return from captivity became a reality for the real seekers after the Lord.

God is looking for victorious Christians. He longs to see His children walk in victory. But, He knows that it takes a seeking heart. There may be plenty of failures when the seeker after God first begins his journey. It takes a while to learn some of the secrets of the victorious life, and to have them realized in our experience. But, as we continue to genuinely seek after God Himself, and the things of God, victory becomes ours in increasing measure.

It is encouraging that in both of the remnant cases cited that the people of God were in a negative situation. Yet, it was from there that they began to seek the Lord and come out. You may feel that you have been in some kind of captivity, or land of idolatry, away from God and His purpose for your life. Be encouraged. From wherever we are, we can always repent and have a fresh start. God is ever so patient, always waiting for us to respond. Let us set our hearts to seek the Lord! If we sincerely and diligently seek Him, we will surely find Him and His plan for our lives. This will include a life of victory. He will also surely reward our seeking after Him.

LESSON 12

Characteristics of the Overcomer – Willing to Suffer

The second characteristic we wish to consider covers a very broad field. It is seen in one form or another on many of the pages of the New Testament. The topic is really worthy of an entire book, so we can only pray that this overview will make an appropriate impact upon the reader.

Willingness to suffer

Our Lord Jesus Christ came to this earth with a heart willing to suffer in order to accomplish God's will. He was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Is. 53:3b, KJV). As His followers, we also should be willing to suffer in order to carry out God's will for our lives. "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who . . . emptied Himself . . . and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5-8).

"Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God" (1 Pet. 4:1-2). "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Phil. 1:29).

A word of caution is in order here. There have been some Christians who have misunderstood the matter of suffering in the Christian life. In their attempt to "follow Christ" in suffering, they have practiced asceticism of various kinds. However, the Bible clearly warns us that self-imposed suffering and mere religious self-denial are of no value (Col. 2:20-23). We should also be cautious of focusing on Christian suffering in a morbid way.

The correct understanding of suffering in the Christian life connects our suffering with God's will. As we shall see, we should be willing to suffer loss to our desires for the purpose of carrying out God's will for us. This was Christ's example in the garden of Gethsemane, where His willingness to go to the cross and suffer hinged upon God's will. "Father, if you are willing remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done" (Lk. 22:42). Also, our suffering circumstances should be according to God's will in His sovereign arrangement, not something we engineer because we think such suffering will make us more "spiritual" (see 1 Pet. 3:17; 4:19).

Let's look at one passage where Jesus taught on the matter of willingness to suffer:

²¹ From that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. ²² And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You!" ²³ But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests [lit., "the things of God"], but man's. ²⁴ Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ²⁵ For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. ²⁶ For what will a man be profited if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds." (Matt. 16:21-27)

Here we see that Peter was a stumbling block to Jesus, an adversary to Him. The Greek word for Satan means adversary. The problem was Peter's mindset. Peter did not think that Jesus should suffer as the Messiah, and he did not want Jesus to suffer. Peter's mindset was that God should exalt Christ as King without suffering. But God's way was to send Christ to suffer in order to accomplish His plan. The natural mind of man does not grasp God's way of the cross – the way of suffering – the way of dying to self - in order to carry out God's will (1 Cor. 1:18-24; 2:14). The expanded translation by Kenneth Wuest reads: "A stumbling block you are to Me, because you do not have a mind for the things of God but for the things of men" (v. 23). The word for mind here includes not only the mental capacity, but also the desires and the will of man's inner being.

The basic problem here is man's unwillingness to suffer the loss of his own desires having their fulfillment. To deny the self means to be willing to let go of what makes one's self happy and satisfied – to have his desires fulfilled. To then take up the cross includes not only death to the self, but also the embracing of God's will. This is what Jesus did in the garden of Gethsemane, when He put aside His will and prayed to accept the Father's will (the cross). "Yet not My will, but Yours be done" (Lk. 22:42).

The Greek word for "life" (v. 25) in the passage above is *psuche*, which means soul. The same word is translated "soul" in verse 26. Although the word for "himself" in verse 24 is not *psuche*, it refers to the same thing in the passage. This is proven by the context and by the parallel passage in Luke 9, where Luke 9:25 speaks of forfeiting "himself," yet Matt. 16:26 speaks of forfeiting the "soul." Thus, to deny the self means to lose one's life, or soul. Yet, when we do this, we then "find" our real life (v. 25). That is, we then discover the real satisfaction of our soul in Christ's life, both now and in reward at the coming of Christ (v. 27).

The meaning of saving, or preserving, the soul is to let it have its satisfaction, fulfilling the soul's desires, as seen in the notion of gaining the whole world (v. 26), if it were possible. To lose one's soul means to suffer the loss of what satisfies, or makes the soul, or self, happy. Only when we are willing to give up what pleases us can we accurately see God's will for us and follow Christ. This is a voluntary suffering by the disciple of Christ. This is what it means to "die to self."

The following examples of pleasing or dying to the self are very limited in their scope, but they will provide some insight into the matter of pleasing the soul's desires. The next lesson will cover a much broader view of this matter.

I will never forget an experience I had as a fairly young Christian. I had taken some seminary courses and had some experience with the Lord, but I still had much to learn. I was part of a church that had a good spiritual ministry and had many real seekers of the Lord. One day I was spending time with an elder who had sort of taken me under his wing. We visited some young college students who had been attending our church from time to time.

After the visit he turned to me and commented about one young man. He stated plainly that this particular young man would never become a lasting member of our congregation. The reason he was so bold to predict this was that he discerned that the young man liked his life style too much to pay the price to follow Christ as hotly as we were doing. He was a Christian, true enough, but from his comments about how much he liked to dine at certain places, and how much he enjoyed certain leisure activities, the wise elder could tell that the critical element of self-denial was missing in his Christian walk. The elder's prediction turned out to be completely accurate. That young man never joined us in our pursuing of the Lord, although some of his friends did.

Please understand that we are not talking about "rules for holy living." What is at issue is the heart's willingness to suffer loss to the pleasures of the soul. Whether or not we actually do forego some pleasure is absolutely a matter of the leading of the Holy Spirit (God's will). Again I want to point out that Christ's acceptance of the suffering of the cross altogether depended upon what God's will was. As we are willing to not please ourselves and do just what God permits, then God will make clear to us what He allows or disallows.

Actually, as we learn to continually deny ourselves and grow in Christ's life, remaining in close fellowship with Him, His desires become ours. Then, it is not just a matter of His specific leading about what He permits or disallows, but the very desires of our heart undergo transformation. Also, as we truly mature in Christ, the strong desires that used to propel us towards avenues of obtaining their satisfaction often seem to lose their power and intensity.

Let me give an illustration of what I am talking about from my experience. Fairly early in my Christian life I saw that some believers in the fellowship I belonged to had some nice Bible covers. I began to feel that I would like a really nice one too. As I began to consider this, and perhaps even started out to buy one, I was very bothered by the Holy Spirit. Something was not right. The more I progressed towards buying a Bible cover the more I felt my fellowship with the Lord was undergoing disruption. Peace was leaving me. As I sought to understand this experience from the Lord, I realized that I had wanted a Bible cover as a "show off" item. The desire for the Bible cover had self-glory as its root, and it was not a desire from the Lord. I yielded to the Lord and did not buy the Bible cover.

Please allow me to share one more experience that may be helpful. Perhaps a year or two after the experience just noted, I moved into an apartment that I was to share with two other young single Christian men. We did not have much furniture, so I went out and purchased a dining room table and some living room furniture. Then, I decided that I wanted some dishes that matched the brown furniture. As I began to move in the direction of shopping for the dishes, the Holy Spirit bothered me. I had no peace and there was a real battle within. We probably had some dishes that would do, but my soul was longing for something of particular beauty, and that longing was infringing upon my love of God. I was loving the things of this world (1 Jn. 2:15), and the Holy Spirit was signaling me that my direction was not pleasing to the Lord. I yielded to the Lord and gave up my desire to buy the dishes.

At the time that I had the two experiences above I was really seeking the Lord and desiring to please Him. If you have never had any experience like this, then it may well be because you have not been seeking the Lord with all of your heart.

Now, many years later, after having lived in a state of willingness to suffer loss to my soul's desires in order to please Christ, I find that I do not have strong interruptions from the Holy Spirit like those noted above. I still get interruptions from the Lord when the self rises up, but nothing like the tussles that I had back then. Rather, I find that the desires of my soul to please itself are usually (not always) overpowered by Christ within before they can surge into great strength. We should grow in the grace of Christ and in the experience of Christ as our very life (Col. 3:4).

We must realize that our fallen soul is pleased by many things, and if we allow it to have its satisfaction unchecked by the Spirit within us, then we will not experience the overcoming life in Christ. In the next lesson we will cover some aspects of this matter of "dying to self."

LESSON 13

Characteristics of the Overcomer – Willingness to Suffer - Dying to Self

The matter of “dying to self” cannot be exhausted by the comments and illustrations of this lesson. We human beings have many avenues of self-desire and self-will which can oppose the character or will of God in any given circumstance. Also, because each personality is unique, there can be expressions of the self-life in one person that are not existent in another person with a different personality. For this reason, each disciple must learn from the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit when his attitudes and actions are wrong before God and he needs to put them to death by the Spirit. There are, of course, some matters of selfish desire that are universally wrong and “sinful” in God’s eyes, being clearly recorded in the Bible. For instance, the “works of the flesh” as recorded in Gal. 5:19-21 are clearly wrong for all disciples. This list of sins in Galatians 5 is well known by believers, and many believers think that if they are not doing these things then they have achieved a good measure of victory. Although these sins often present a real battle for the believer, victory in these things does not equate to full Christian victory. Lack of humility and inward submission towards fellow believers, as well as unforgiveness, are other examples of the self-life, among many, that are clearly spelled out as wrong in Scripture. Yet, as we truly grow in Christ, learning of His character and ways, we will realize that our self-life needs to die in many ways that are not always clearly spelled out in explicit commandments in the New Testament. Still, Jesus’ command to us to die to self is sweeping and all inclusive: “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself [totally], and take up his cross and follow Me” (Matt. 16:24). “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate [in comparison to love and obedience to Me] his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple” (Lk. 14:26).

Let us briefly explore some of the ways that the self-life might be alive in us in order to help us recognize where the Holy Spirit might desire to work in our lives.

We must realize that our fallen soul is pleased by many things, and if we allow it to have its satisfaction unchecked by the Spirit within us, then we will not experience the overcoming life in Christ. The Lord pictured one of the dimensions of this problem in His parable of the sower, where He told us that a fruitful life can be frustrated by our desires for material things and pleasures. “And the seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity” (Lk. 8:14).

The pursuit of more and more material things and pleasures is a sign of an important aspect of **self-indulgence**. The influence of materialism on American Christianity probably cannot be overstated. It has stunted the spiritual growth of most believers in America, as church members have imitated unbelievers in going after material goods, pleasures and entertainments in a myriad of forms. Instead of being satisfied with what God has given in the basic needs of life and in the joy of knowing and serving the Lord, many believers in America have gone into burdensome debt (beyond what might be modest and prudent) in pursuit of a lifestyle of “enjoyment,” fueled by all manner of goods and avenues of pleasure for the soul. What is missing is the cross of Christ – applied to their worldly appetites. Paul witnessed this same problem in his day and warned the believers in Philippi about it:

Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now

tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. (Phil. 3:17-20)

The writer of Hebrews spoke similarly of the example of Esau as a warning for believers. Esau traded the privilege of his birthright (a type of future rewards) for the momentary pleasure of a bowl of stew. "See to it . . . that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal" (Heb. 12:15-16).

The desire to be entertained to the delight of the soul has even entered the meetings of the church. Many modern church musical and dramatic performances, if truly spiritually discerned, cater more to the eye, the ear and the emotions than to the spirit. Our worship to God is tainted when it is geared for the soul's delight. A picture of this is seen in Exodus 32, when the Israelites created a golden calf and worshipped it as if they were worshipping the Lord. The Israelites mixed pleasure into their worship in order to satisfy their souls' longings: "So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings, and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play" (Ex. 32:6).

Notice also the matter of worries in the passage in Luke 8 noted above: "as they go on their way they are choked with worries . . . and bring no fruit to maturity" (Lk. 8:14). We humans can be fully caught up with our problems and our worries. When we do this and do not let go of our worries by bringing them to the Lord in trustful prayer, then our soul is caught up with its own problems and we cannot fully function spiritually in hearing and serving the Lord. This matter of being "choked with worries" is a significant problem of the self-life. This is why God wants us to bring our anxious thoughts to Him in prayer (Phil. 4:6-7; 1 Pet. 5:6-7).

Another arena where Christ calls us to die to self is in our family loves and ties. Our soul can be so wrapped up with the pleasures, problems and emotions of family life that these can keep us from following the Lord fully and realizing His plan for our lives. Jesus plainly tells us that we need to know His cross in our family relationships. "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me" (Matt. 10:37-38). The blockage that love, sympathy or concern for a family member can cause to our full following of Christ very often goes undetected by believers. They may love Christ, and truly desire to honor Him, yet often their emotions towards their family members short-circuit obedience to God's will for them.

King David was an example of one whose sympathies for his children led him astray from doing his duty to God. God had given him the throne and he was to rule Israel effectively for God's purposes. Yet, we see him lacking the will to discipline Amnon his son for raping his half-sister (2 Sam. 13:1-21). Is this how God wanted the king to rule in righteousness? Again, when David's son Absalom murdered Amnon, David did not act. Instead, his heart yearned for his son Absalom (2 Sam. 13:39; 14:33). When Absalom raised up a huge rebellion to overthrow David's throne, David the King had to go to war against him. Yet, David seemed more concerned for his son's welfare than for the successful defense of the throne (2 Sam. 18:5). When David learned that Absalom had fallen in the battle, he was so overcome with grief that he expressed no concern for his own men who had risked their lives to save the king and the kingdom. Joab had to confront him for his lack of care for his own loyal servants (2 Sam. 18:33-19:8).

We are surely called to be good parents and to help our children. Yet, I have seen that it is easy for parents to be so wrapped up in concern for their children that they are not really free to hear God and follow His plan for them. It seems sometimes as if the whole life of the parent is wrapped up almost every hour with the child. The Lord may want to use the parent in service, but the parent is not free to serve. Instead he or she is bound because of concerns for the child. Thus, the parent's decisions are really primarily influenced by concern for the child, not by concern for God's kingdom. And, unfortunately, this pattern can even be witnessed in the parents of grown children who are out on their own and may even be married! May God open our eyes to see this matter of self-denial in the familial emotions.

How do we react when we are suffering? Is **self-pity** and complaining at work in our hearts? Is this not contrary to God's way of accepting all things in our lives as being allowed by God and trusting in Him to care for us (Rom. 8:28; Eph. 5:20; 1 Pet. 5:6-7)? In Matthew 11 we see that the Lord Jesus describes how three different cities in Israel had rejected His ministry, even though they had been blessed with His miraculous works. As He spoke of the lack of the response of these cities to His ministry, He thanked the Father saying, "Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father" (Matt. 11:26-27a). In other words, Jesus recognized God's sovereignty in allowing the rejection of His ministry. Immediately following this, Jesus gives His disciples an important lesson: "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:28-29). The Greek word for "gentle" as used in this passage has been explained by Greek experts as meaning that Christ was willing to accept God's sovereign dealings in His life without complaint or resistance. We must learn to agree to die to self-pity through our identification with Christ in His death, and to believe that we are now alive to God, yielded to Him in order to learn of Him and glorify Him, even in the very difficult circumstances of life.

How do we react when we are misunderstood? Do we immediately begin to set the record straight, so that others will not think wrongly of us? The root of instant **self-vindication** is the self-life. It is God's way to wait upon the Lord and seek His mind as to whether, and how, we should correct a misunderstanding. God may be calling us to suffer a misunderstanding in silence.

In our relationships with others around us, whether family or co-workers or fellow-believers, are we **self-assertive**? Are we unhappy because our ideas or our desires are not being accepted by others? Are we looking for ways that we can knock down the road blocks set up by others to our desires? Are we not willing to sincerely listen to their ideas and concerns because we only want things "our way?" Do we have such a high regard for our ideas only, indicating **self-respect**? James advises us: "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" (Jas. 3:17, NKJV). The Greek word translated "willing to yield," means "easily persuaded" and is translated in various versions as: "reasonable," "open to reason," and "easily entreated." In other words, this wisdom means that the believer is open to the ideas of others and is not just respecting his own ideas and constantly pushing for his own way.

When we have any successes in life, is our heart filled with **self-congratulation** and **self-admiration**? Do we feed on and nurture these thoughts within us? Or, when such thoughts start to come to us do we immediately run from them and humble ourselves before God, telling Him that without Him we can do nothing and that to Him belongs all the glory?

What about when we have failures in life? Is our first reaction to excuse ourselves and justify ourselves? This aspect of the self-life is very strong in some believers. They do not want to admit that the fault lies with them, but instead always shift the blame to some other person or cause. This **self-excusing** and **self-justification** must go to the cross of Christ and we must learn to take responsibility for our failures, without casting blame upon circumstances or others. If we do not deal with this aspect of the self-life, our progress in the Christian life will be cut short.

One of the great signs of an “alive” self-life is our reaction to criticism. The self simply does not like to be criticized by others. When someone criticizes us, do we immediately bristle inside, rejecting the criticism outright, instantly embracing **self-approval**? Or, do we stand against this natural tendency by humbling ourselves before God, looking to Him that we might be willing to receive and humbly evaluate the criticism of others in an objective way? Even if we decide that the criticism may not be accurate, we still need to avoid any prideful attitude within concerning our “rightness” and the other person’s “wrongness.” Any attitude of “how dare he say that,” or any attitude that is now negative towards that person just because he or she dared to criticize us must be dealt with in the light of the Lord. It is too easy to let pride give us the wrong attitude towards others or about ourselves.

A general sign of the self-life is the tendency toward **self-absorption**. This means that the person is wrapped up with his plans, his interests, his problems and his desires. One significant result is that he is not attuned to the needs, the interests or the desires of others. Others are around him and in his life, but he has little true care or heart towards them. This is certainly not the way Jesus was. He was constantly tuned in to the needs of others. So Paul admonishes us: “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4).

Each new day opens up opportunities for us in terms of what we might do or how we might spend our time. Regrettably, the daily routine of many of God’s children is ordered by **self-pleasing** and **self-choosing**. Instead of deliberately dying to self and looking to God for His will in the daily matters of life, the self-life is left to run on “auto pilot.” We must learn to start each day with an agreement with God’s truth that we have died to sin (including the self-life) and now we are alive in resurrection solely unto Him, with the members of our body yielded to Him for His will in our daily affairs. Then, throughout the day we should keep our submission in our daily affairs to Him alive by inner contact with the Lord. Will we do this?

Then there is **self-confidence**. It is good that one may have confidence when facing the challenges and affairs of life. But **self-confidence** runs against the whole counsel of Scripture. Our confidence should be in God, not in ourselves. Maybe we may have successfully handled our job or our affairs for years, perhaps even on “our own steam,” apart from the Lord’s strength. But our “success,” or even our education or training, should never lead us to the deadly sin of “self-confidence.” After all, can we truly be a fully proper employee, a fully proper family member or a fully proper citizen anyway? If so, why would we need God? **Self-confidence** is the opposite attitude of that portrayed in the very first Beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God” (Matt. 5:3). It is knowing the destitution of one’s self and then reaching out to God that brings in the Holy Spirit. To be “poor in spirit” means we lose our **self-sufficiency** and our **self-dependency**. We recognize that we cannot, in ourselves, be who we should be or do what we should do. So, we turn to God in complete dependency upon Him. We

need to especially repent of self-confidence in spiritual endeavors: “being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. **Such confidence we have through Christ toward God.** Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God” (2 Cor. 3:3-5). All self-confidence must go to the cross and we must take our proper place of dependency upon God, trusting confidently in Him to be all that we need to live our lives.

Although God does not deliberately aim to obliterate our distinct personalities, Christian testimonies concerning the work of the Holy Spirit do indicate that God sometimes desires to adjust some characteristics of our unique self-life that frustrate Christ being manifest in our living. For example, one saint may learn from God that his constant humorous comments are not truly reflective of Christ. Another saint may be enlightened by God that his talkativeness must be curbed by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps, on the other extreme, a saint may be touched by God that his shyness and unwillingness to speak up is a hindrance to God's life within him and it must go to the cross so that God can speak through him. One person may have been raised in an untidy home atmosphere and he tends to carry this sloppiness with him in his adult life. Yet, God may touch him that this lifestyle does not reflect the orderliness of God. On the other hand, a person may be brought up to be extremely tidy and thorough, yet God may show him that he is so attuned to this way as a lifestyle habit that he is hindering God's desire to use him at certain times in caring for others because he is preoccupied with personal organization. These examples show that God is ever desirous to have us cooperate in putting the self-life to death – our desires, our choices and our ways of living – so that Christ can live through us.

May we humble ourselves before God concerning this great matter of willingness to die to self. “Oh, Father, I am sure that there is much of the self-life in me that I have not yet seen and that has not yet been put to death by the cross. By your grace I tell you today that I am willing to suffer death to my self-life. I want to deny myself, take up my cross and follow You, Jesus. I ask for enlightenment through Your word and by Your Spirit in my life so that this matter of self-denial can become a reality in my life. I ask that Christ be glorified in my life. I ask this in Jesus' name. Thank You, Lord. ”

The writer gratefully acknowledges that some of the ideas in this lesson come directly from L. E. Maxwell's book, “*Born Crucified.*”

LESSON 14

Characteristics of the Overcomer – Willing to Suffer (continued)

In the prior two lessons we have looked at the matter of willingness to suffer. There, we focused on our willingness to suffer loss of satisfaction to our soul as well as aspects of dying to self. We will now look at two more aspects of willingness to suffer, one in this lesson and one in the next. We should say that these aspects can certainly involve the first aspect we covered, yet I believe we need to see them distinctly in order for us to get a complete view of the dynamic of suffering in the life of the victorious Christian.

Willingness to suffer certain circumstances and learn from God

This aspect of “willingness to suffer” involves the believer’s acceptance of circumstances (which cause one to suffer) that God allows in his life, along with an attitude of seeking to learn from God, experience God and obey God during the period of suffering. Such a concept does not mean that a believer should not pray for relief from the suffering. He may ask God for relief, but he should accept God’s answer as respects deliverance. We have Paul and his prayers related to his “thorn in the flesh” as an example in this regard (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Sufferings are used by God to strengthen our faith and to mature our Christian character. The first passage we will look at on this matter is in Romans:

¹ Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. ³ And not only this, but we also exult in tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; ⁴ and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope. (Rom. 5:1-4)

The Greek word that is translated as tribulation is *thlipsis* (Strong’s #2347). This noun is from a verb that means to crush, press or squeeze. This word is used in Scripture to describe, among other things, financial pressures (2 Cor. 8:13) and the difficulties of married life (1 Cor. 7:28). It is also used of persecution for the faith (Heb. 10:33), but we are going to cover that in the next lesson.

The suffering of tribulation creates an environment where perseverance, or endurance, is needed. The Greek word for perseverance in this passage is *hupomone* (Strong’s #5281). It is composed of two Greek words meaning “to remain” and “under.” Literally, as a noun, it means “an abiding under.” Such perseverance is a virtue whereby one can remain under a set of circumstances and not yield to the pressure of those circumstances. For the Christian, this means not to yield to the pressure in a way that dishonors God. This meaning of endurance is confirmed in Hebrews: “For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised” (Heb. 10:36).

The victorious Christian who is persevering in tribulation is one who remains faithful to the Lord, drawing upon Him in close fellowship, and obeying what he learns that God requires of him during the time of testing. He is certainly learning to “die to self” in the suffering, not yielding to the temptation to satisfy his self-life. As one perseveres under tribulation, what is produced is “proven character” (v. 4), or “approvedness” (Wuest), or “maturity of character – that is, approved faith and tried integrity” (AMP).

The next passage we will look at on this topic is in James. “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let

endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jas. 1:2-4). The Greek word used here for trial is *peirasmos* (Strong’s #3986). This word means a trial, or a temptation, and it involves putting someone to a test. Regarding this word, Greek scholar Marvin Vincent says that it involves all that goes into a test of character. The various trials would include adversities, or suffering situations, but the trials would not necessarily be limited to these types of sufferings. The word is often used of a temptation to sin.

According to James here, when we experience trials, our faith is tested. Faith here would refer to our walk of faith with the Lord, not our initial faith for eternal salvation. It is our walk of faith, our Christian living, that is being proved. God permits these tests **for the purpose of bringing forth Christ in our living**. As our faith undergoes this process of proving, what is produced is endurance (the same word translated in James as “endurance” is the word for “perseverance” in Romans 5:3-4 noted above). Again we see that if we endure as God desires, maturity results. “But let endurance and steadfastness and patience have full play and do a thorough work, so that you may be [people] perfectly and fully developed (with no defects), lacking in nothing” (Jas. 1:4, AMP).

Approval out of suffering

The next passage we want to look at is from First Peter. “⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, even though now, for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, ⁷ that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:6-7).

Here we see that we can be “distressed” (or, “made sorrowful” – Weust) by various trials (again the Greek word here for trial is *peirasmos*, Strong’s # 3986). These trials may be deemed “necessary” by God in order to test, or prove our walk of faith. Verse seven explains this testing more, as it reveals the proof (genuineness or approval) of our faith that should result from such a test. Such a proof of the genuineness of our faith (proved by us successfully passing the test) will issue in praise and glory and honor from God when Jesus returns. This verse is pointing to Christ’s approval and reward at His Judgment Seat.

The process of **testing for approval** is compared in this passage to the testing of gold by fire. Marvin Vincent, a Greek scholar, describes this Greek verb for testing (*dokimazo*; Strong’s #1381) as one that was used for assaying or testing metals, with the idea being that the word means approval by testing.

In summation, we can see from these passages that God allows trials in our lives as He deems necessary. These suffering situations are a test for us. Just as the assayer puts ore into the fire in order to bring forth and discover the quality of the gold therein, so God proves us in trials, looking for a response from us of endurance and growth in Christian character. Based upon our perseverance, He will eventually reward us. One verse that shows this reward is James 1:12: “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (Jas. 1:12).

The victorious Christian will accept each trial as a God-given opportunity to seek the Lord, learn from Him, and experience Him, thus maturing in Christian character. The overcomer will trust his Lord during the time of trial, realizing that God is in control of his circumstances, and that God’s purposes are always positive. In time of trial, he will try to learn what response God is looking for from him.

In this matter, Christ is our example. The Scripture tells us that, “Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered” (Heb. 5:8). This may not be an easy verse to understand, but I think it means that as Christ encountered suffering situations, there was a new learning experience in each one with respect to the nature of obedience that the Father

required. So, He could learn the reality of what obedience meant only as a Son who passed through genuine human experience, especially experiences of suffering.

Grace in suffering

The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus “has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15b). So, He passed every test given to Him. And these tests were often connected with suffering: “For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:18).

It is so encouraging that Christ suffered before us as a human. After passing every test presented by sufferings, He now is our faithful and merciful high priest ready to aid us as we pass through these tests! He is ready to grant us His grace in every situation so that we may endure the trial and grow in the Lord. In Hebrews chapter four notice how Christ’s sympathetic care for us as our high priest is connected to the supply of grace we need when we undergo trials:

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who was tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:14-16).

As we saw in earlier lessons, grace can mean a spiritual supply of Christ’s life ministered to us. When we undergo suffering, nothing is more comforting and strengthening than this grace. This grace is just the flow of the Spirit to us.

Most of us are still too dependent upon ourselves, and still too self-sufficient in our own resources. God, in His wise sovereignty, allows situations in our lives that perplex, tax and exhaust us. When faced with these circumstances, we become powerless to handle them. We realize within that there is no way for us to make it through these circumstances, especially with a positive testimony for the Lord. God is at work in these situations. He is hoping, and waiting, for us to come to Him so that we may experience His supply of grace. He is using these times to wean us from self-dependence in order to make us completely dependent upon Him. Consider what Paul says about his suffering from his “thorn in the flesh.”

“Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Cor. 12:8-10)

Paul realized that his suffering situation reduced him to utter weakness. This then became God’s opportunity to perfect His power in Paul’s life by the supply of grace. Because God’s power could be realized in Paul’s life through this situation, Paul was content with it.

Oh, brothers and sisters, can you see what God is doing in our trials? He wants us to discover fresh supplies of His grace and power in our weakness. God’s power realized in our weakness produces nothing less than the manifestation of Christ in our living. If we seek God’s grace and allow it to work in our lives, He will reward us. Can we be content, as Paul was, with our suffering situation, especially when we see what God can gain from it? Let us come forward to Him and His throne of grace. Let us reach out to Him from the depth of our spirit, with a heart utterly opened to Him, in order to take in His supply of grace! This is why He has brought us to our suffering situation, and to our place of weakness.

Old Testament examples and New Testament admonition

The children of Israel passed through a great testing experience in the wilderness for forty years. Many of the lessons in the wilderness involved suffering situations. Scripture records that God used the wilderness trials to humble the children of Israel in order to reveal what was in their hearts, especially their attitude towards obedience. "You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not" (Deut. 8:2). Concerning this wilderness experience the Bible says: "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they are written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor. 10:11). We will now see how this wilderness experience provides lessons from which we as New Testament believers can learn.

Most of the Israelites failed the wilderness tests. For example, when God led them to a place where there was no water, they quarreled with Moses and accused him of bringing them out of Egypt to die of thirst (Ex. 17:1-3). Did you notice that God led them to a place where there was no water, a place of suffering?

Further, because they had no water, they questioned whether God was with them or for them at all (Ex. 17:7). This is the kind of reaction that a non-overcoming believer can have when God allows suffering to invade his life. He will complain about his situation, and he will accuse God and others concerning his trial. Those who do not accept God's dealings in their lives through sufferings may grow bitter. Their fellowship with God will wane, and, like the failed Israelites, they will harden their hearts towards Him (Heb. 3:15). It is God's intention, however, that in the hour of suffering we would humbly seek Him, find His grace, learn from Him and follow Him in obedience.

As an instructive picture, God introduced the manna for His children at the very time He led them to a place where they suffered the adversity of hunger (Ex. 16:3-4). Additionally, on the occasion when they suffered the lack of water, as noted in the passage mentioned above, God introduced water from the rock for them (Ex. 17:6). The manna typifies Christ as our spiritual life supply, as does the water from the rock (Jn. 6:31-33; 1 Cor. 10:4). This means that when we encounter a suffering situation, God is inviting us to experience Him, perhaps in a new way, a deeper way, or a more consistent way than previously, as our life supply.

Those who resist cooperation with God in sufferings may try to escape them. For example, a believer who lives with a difficult spouse may decide to just get a divorce, rather than seeking to endure the situation by God's grace.

When suffering comes we must understand God's sovereignty over our lives. We must trust Him in every situation. Also, we must understand His ways. Concerning the children of Israel who failed in the wilderness, God says, "They always go astray in their heart; and **they did not know My ways**" (Heb. 3:10b). They did not realize, just as some of God's children today do not realize, that God's way is to allow trials and sufferings in our lives. He does so with a purpose. God is proving us, with a hope that we will agree to die to self, and to grow in grace and dependence upon Him, living out Christ, and following His will (see Deut. 8:2-5 concerning this purpose in the wilderness).

It would be worthwhile for you to study two New Testament passages on the wilderness experience in order to learn from it. These portions of God's word are Hebrews chapters three and four, and First Corinthians 9:24-10:13. In this last passage we can see the concept of approval and reward (9:25) versus disapproval (9:27). This section about the lesson of the wilderness example ends with this admonition and encouragement: "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:12-13).

God's care for us during our time of suffering

Yes, God never tests us with suffering which we cannot handle by His grace, which He will supply to all who come to Him for it (Heb. 4:16). Even though we know that God in His sovereignty is allowing suffering to enter our lives, we should never think that He is uncaring. No, He sympathizes with us in our trials, and desires to carry us through them victoriously. Note again the following verse from Hebrews. "For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted" (Heb. 2:18). "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tested in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

When suffering comes, it is almost always accompanied by anxiety. Our problems raise a lot of anxious questions in our minds. "How can I feed my family without a job?" "What if the treatment doesn't work?" "What if my spouse doesn't change and I have to endure this situation for the rest of my life?" God realizes that anxiety can arise, and that the devil can even take advantage of us with anxious thoughts. He gives us much reassurance in First Peter, where Peter wrote to believers who were undergoing the suffering of persecution:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, **casting all of your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you.** Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, **firm in your faith**, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you (1 Pet. 5:6-10).

God cares for us and does not want us to live in anxiety in our suffering situations. Rather, He wants us to cast our anxiety upon Him, trusting in His care for us. He wants us to resist any anxious thoughts that may come from the devil. God desires that we would stand firm in our faith that He cares for us, and will undergird us in our situation.

There are two kinds of suffering that I did not specifically include under this aspect of willingness to suffer. There is a suffering which we bring upon ourselves, and this is commented on briefly by Peter: "By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler" (1 Pet. 4:15). We suffer natural consequences from our sins. For example, a thief will suffer during his time in jail.

The other type of suffering concerns the suffering of specific discipline from the Lord, which God may bring into play in our lives for sin. This is seen in Hebrews 12:4-13.

In both of these types of suffering God deals with us governmentally due to our actions, and there is additional learning for us there. Nevertheless, the general principle still holds that God desires us to learn from Him during these times, experience Him and grow in Him.

A final aspect concerning our willingness to suffer remains, and that will be covered in the next lesson.

LESSON 15

Characteristics of the Overcomer – Willing to Suffer (continued)

In this lesson we will cover a final aspect of the overcomer's willingness to suffer. The victorious Christian must be willing to suffer for righteousness sake, and even for Christ's sake, that is, just because he bears the name of Christ. This is the suffering of persecution.

The verses we will cover speak pretty much for themselves. Yet, it is one thing to read these things on paper, and an altogether different matter to experience them. Those who really suffer from the abuse of others, just because they are following Christ, know a fellowship with the Lord that is truly special.

If one reads the testimonies of those who have been tortured or killed for Christ, one realizes that he is stepping onto truly holy ground. There is a separation unto Christ, and an experience of the reality of His presence, that seems deeper than that of other spiritual experiences. And, as we shall see, there is also a promise of great reward.

In the Sermon on the Mount, we read the following:

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on account of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt. 5:10-12)

In Luke we read a similar passage: "Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and cast insults at you, and spurn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets" (Lk. 6:22-23).

Notice in the last passage how men will hate disciples "for the sake of the Son of Man." This means "on account of the Son of Man" (AMP). In other words, simply because we are following Christ and are identified with Him, we may suffer persecution.

Jesus told us in advance that we should expect such persecution as His followers: "Remember the word that I said to you, "A slave is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also" (Jn. 15:20).

Those believers who are willing to leave all in order to truly follow Christ are definitely going to suffer persecution, as the Lord tells us in Mark 10:

Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, **along with persecutions**; and in the age to come, eternal life." (Mk. 10:29-30)

We may suffer not only because are believers, but also because of our righteous living, which infuriates the unrighteous: "not as Cain, who was of the evil one, and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous" (1 Jn. 3:12).

Two passages about suffering for righteous living follow: "But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled" (1 Pet. 3:14). "And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12).

Yes, there will be times that we will be persecuted for doing what God considers as right. Of course, this kind of mistreatment often comes from those who do not know Christ. However, it is my experience, and that of others, that sometimes even fellow believers can say evil things about us, or cause us other harm, simply because they do not like the way we are following Christ. This is very sad, but I would warn you to be prepared for mistreatment even from brothers in Christ. If a believer sincerely desires to go deeper with the Lord than what most Christians experience, he may be subject to misunderstanding and ridicule.

As we have seen before, suffering comprises a test of character. This is also true of the suffering of persecution. The background of the book of First Peter, along with the context, shows that the fiery trial of suffering noted below is persecution for bearing the name of Christ.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. . . . if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God." (1 Pet. 4:12-16)

Early Christian history records that when persecution took place under the Roman emperors, some believers were steadfast and did not deny Christ. Other believers recanted their faith and were thus spared mistreatment or death. Jesus specifically warned us not to fear men, but rather to fear God and freely confess Christ before the tribunals (Matt. 10:16-33; Lk. 12:4-12). A denial of Christ under threat of persecution, He warned, would result in a denial by Him before the Father and His angels at His return (Matt. 10:33; Lk. 12:9). Such a denial will not result in the loss of eternal salvation, but of reward during His kingdom reign of 1,000 years (2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 20:4).

Those of us who live in the United States know virtually nothing of physical persecution for our faith. However, there are many believers today in Muslim, communist or other societies who are suffering severely for their confession of faith. We need to pray for our fellow believers that they will endure such severe testing.

A time of severe persecution against all believers is coming (Mk. 13:9-13). This will occur during the turbulent climax of this age. We should prepare our hearts now for this coming persecution.

The following Scriptures show the relationship between our willingness to suffer persecution and the matter of overcoming:

"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." (Rev. 2:10-11)

"And they overcame him [the devil] because of the blood of the Lamb, and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even unto death." (Rev. 12:11)

Our willingness to suffer in the ways we have described in these last four lessons is a key to our victory. Of course, we can obtain the grace to faithfully endure such suffering by coming to God

for it (Heb. 4:16). Paul testified: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

We should not be fearful of the suffering to come, including persecution. Often our enemy, Satan, will try to make us fearful about what we might imagine is to come. We should not let our souls be unsettled in this way. Rather, we should hold fast to God's promise that He will not allow us to be tested beyond what we are able to endure (1 Cor. 10:13). We can rest assured that no matter what situation God allows, He is there to grant us the grace we need to endure it. We simply need to trust Him.

Perhaps this would be a good time to pray something like the following: "Lord, by Your grace I am willing to suffer. I am willing to lose my soul's satisfaction according to Your will. By Your grace, I am willing to accept every suffering circumstance You sovereignly allow in my life. I may pray for relief, but I will accept Your answer. I will seek You during my time of trial, and learn from You and follow You. I also know that to suffer for Your name, Jesus, is a great privilege and has a great reward. I trust in Your strength to be ready to suffer persecution when it comes my way. I want to stand up for You and Your righteousness. Thank You, Jesus, for Your hand on my life. I want to mature through all of the sufferings, and I desire to bring glory and honor to Your name. Amen."

LESSON 16

Characteristics of the Overcomer – Fully Following the Lord

In this lesson we are going to cover a final characteristic of the victorious Christian. We will look at some New Testament overcomers who had “an ear to hear,” as well as some Old Testament overcomers who fully followed the Lord. Both of these examples point to the same characteristic – a desire to know the Lord’s will fully and to follow it. Of course, we may see some overlap in this topic and the characteristics of seeking the Lord and willingness to suffer. Yet, I believe it will be profitable to look at the importance of fully following the Lord.

In Revelation chapters two and three, we see a call by the Lord Jesus to believers in the seven assemblies to overcome (to be “victorious”). A careful reading of these chapters reveals that the overcomers are those who “have an ear to hear” what the Spirit is speaking to them through the letters given to John by the Lord Jesus. Here is an example: “He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7). Note that here we see a reward promised to the overcomer. The promises to the overcomers in these seven churches have nothing to do with eternal salvation, but have everything to do with future reward. The believer’s rewards are decided at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

I believe we can see the following elements in having “an ear to hear”: 1) a desire to hear the Lord speak; 2) a desire to learn exactly what the Lord’s directions are in the speaking; 3) a willingness to fully obey what the Lord requires.

In five of the seven churches (Rev. 2, 3) the Lord was calling for the believers to have some change in their way. The Lord had no correction for the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia. To the church in Smyrna, the call was to be faithful during an upcoming test of imprisonment. The church in Philadelphia had already been tried and approved. The saints there only needed to hold fast to their attainment in order to receive the reward.

Here are some instructive passages pertaining to the matter of having an ear to hear:

“And He said, ‘If you will give earnest heed to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in His sight, and **give ear** to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians; for I, the Lord, am your healer.’” (Ex. 15:26)

“Yet He sent prophets to them, to bring them again unto the Lord; and they testified against them: but they would **not give ear.**” (2 Chron. 24:19, KJV)

“The heart of the prudent seeketh knowledge; and **the ear of the wise** seeketh knowledge” (Pr. 18:15, KJV).

“To whom shall I speak, and give warning, **that they may hear**, behold, **their ear is uncircumcised**, and **they cannot hearken**: behold, the word of the Lord is unto them a reproach; they have no delight in it.” (Jer. 6:10, KJV)

“But they **hearkened not, nor inclined their ear**, but walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward, and not forward.” (Jer. 7:24, KJV)

The last two passages were spoken about God’s people (Israel). Overall, we see that God’s people can have a desire to hear, learn and obey, or to not hear, not learn, and not obey.

A foundational principle of living the victorious Christian life is, of course, obeying the will of God. Yet, doing the will of God must be based upon knowing the will of God. **The overcomer must have a heart to seek out and know the will of God** (“the ear of the wise seeketh knowledge” – Pr. 18:15b, KJV). Here are some important verses that highlight this concept:

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may **prove what the will of God** is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Rom. 12:2)

“but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light . . . **trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.**” (Eph. 5:8-10)

“So then do not be foolish, but **understand what the will of the Lord is.**” (Eph. 5:17)

Knowing God’s will is not automatic for believers. Our mind needs to be renewed, and we need spiritual insight in order to know God’s will (see 1 Cor. 2:14-16 and Col. 1:9-10). So, what is required on our part is a real seeking after the knowledge of His will.

It is my sad observation that today this attitude of seeking to know God’s will, in order to obey it, is missing in most Christians in America. Most believers in the church in America seem satisfied with following the crowd in their church and just doing what they do. They also usually just accept whatever the preacher says. It seems to be the exceptional believer who earnestly seeks out God’s will for some area of his life, let alone all areas.

God, however, longs for us learn from Him and His word. He wants us to follow Him in so many things. He is trying to speak to us, especially from His word. He is also trying to speak to us by His genuine servants who minister His pure word (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:1-2). He desires for us to learn how to handle our finances, our lifestyle, our family relationships, our worship, our church practice, our service to Him, etc. Since most believers in America do not seem to be seeking to know God’s will, however, they will not hear Him.

It also takes a seeking heart for the believer to discern if what a supposed teacher of God’s word is teaching is actually true. The Bible warns us of false prophets (Matt. 7:15), false apostles (Rev. 2:2), and false teachers (2 Pet. 2:1). The Scripture even warns that there will be a time when popular teachers are the very ones who will turn believers away from the truth (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

The words of every person speaking for God deserve scrutiny, to sort out the good from the bad (1 Thess. 5:20-22). Some of those speaking for God may have part truth and part error. If a believer is not in the Bible himself, desperately seeking to learn from God, he may surely miss God’s genuine speaking. He will not have an ear to hear what **the Spirit** is speaking. There are many voices in the church today. Some are speaking tradition, some false teaching, and some just plain religion, without the reality of the Spirit of God. Yet, what we need is an ear for what **the Spirit** is speaking. For this, we must have a heart to learn God’s will and to do His will. Of course, to “do His will” always involves a cost – something of self-denial.

Now let us turn to perhaps the clearest example of overcomers in the Old Testament – Joshua and Caleb. These two men clearly had an “ear to hear.” They desired to know God’s will and to fully follow it. They were undaunted by the demands presented for following God. They were willing to pay a price to obey God.

A significant part of their story is recorded in Numbers chapter thirteen. The children of Israel were on the border of Canaan, the land which God had already promised to give to them (Num. 13:2). The children of Israel wanted to first spy out the land before attempting to conquer it, so they suggested that a party first be sent into it (Deut. 1:22). So Moses sent twelve leaders from the twelve tribes, who discovered that the land flowed with milk and honey and had abundant fruit.

The land, however, also contained giants, and ten of the leaders declared that the giants would prevent them from conquering the promised land. These ten, along with those who listened to them, did not have an ear to hear the Lord. Note what Scripture says about this incident: “Then they despised the pleasant land. They did not believe in His word, but grumbled in their tents. They did not listen to the voice of the LORD. Therefore He swore to them that He would cast them down in the wilderness” (Ps. 106:24-26).

Caleb and Joshua, however, declared that the Israelites were well able to take the land, for God would bring them in (Num. 14:6-9). However, the people were persuaded by the fearful report of the ten leaders, and they were ready to kill Joshua and Caleb.

The result of this incident was that God denied the promised land to all of the adult men who left Egypt, except for Joshua and Caleb. The people failed because they did not believe God’s word and did not trust God to bring them into the land, and because they were unwilling to obey the Lord by going forward. They did not want to face the giants.

“Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs, which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and **have not listened to My voice**, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it. But My servant Caleb, because he had a different spirit and has **followed Me fully**, I will bring into the land which he entered, and his descendants shall take possession of it” (Num. 14:22-24).

“None of the men who came up from Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob; for they **did not follow Me fully**, except Caleb, the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua the son of Nun, for **they have followed Me fully**.” (Num. 32:11-12)

From these passages in the Old and New Testament we see that overcomers are those who really desire to hear God’s voice, learn His will and fully follow Him. In five of the seven churches in Revelation chapters two and three we see a situation where the believers were **partially following** the Lord. The Spirit was calling for these believers to give up some practice, belief or attitude that had already invaded the assembly, and to press onward in God’s way.

In His speaking to all seven of these churches, what Jesus was asking the believers to do was to hear the Spirit’s speaking and then fully follow Him faithfully. Of course, this does not mean that there will not be failures along the way for those who will eventually be positively rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Even those in five of the seven churches had some serious shortcomings. It is not that the overcomer never has a failure. Rather, it is that the overcomer is one who is seeking to hear and respond to God’s voice. He is willing to repent and change his way. Those who would seek to hear and respond in obedience to God’s voice are the overcomers, those who will receive the promised reward.

How many believers today are really seeking to fully follow the Lord? It seems to me that there are many wrong heart attitudes, sinful doings, worldly ways, unscriptural practices and beliefs in churches today. Yet, most believers and leaders are often complacent about these shortcomings. They seem satisfied with only partially following the Lord.

Just as those ancient Hebrews did not want to face those giants in battle, most believers today are unwilling to pay the price required for following the Lord fully. So, they do not have “an ear to hear.” That would require suffering. The cost to fully follow Christ could include changing one’s lifestyle, giving up some worldly ways, giving up one’s ministry and salary, leaving a

denomination or a church, or risk having one's family turn against him. Our Lord warned us about the cost of discipleship, and counseled us to count the cost (Lk. 14:25-29). Once again we are reminded of our need to be willing to suffer.

May we pray?

"Oh, Lord Jesus, have mercy upon me. By Your grace I would be an overcomer. I want to be willing to follow You and Your will fully. Lord, bring me into Your light. Show me where I am not following You. I want to hear Your voice and follow You. Show me my heart attitudes, my worldly loves and ways, my habits and my doings that are not according to You. Show me the church traditions, beliefs and practices that are not according to Your truth. I pray that the eyes of my heart would be enlightened by Your revelation of my true situation. By Your grace, Lord, I will seek to know Your will. I will search out Your Scriptures to learn the truth. By Your grace, Lord Jesus, I am willing to follow You, no matter what the cost. If others reject me or misunderstand me, I will still be faithful to You. May Your will be done in my life. Thank You, Jesus. Amen."

LESSON 17

Practices of the Overcomer – Handling the Word of God

It is my observation and experience that victorious Christians are disciplined in certain key practices. These key practices will not be new to the reader, but some of the details that I suggest may be new.

The practices we will cover are: handling the word of God, prayer, and keeping a good conscience. The common thread of all of these practices is our fellowship with God. These godly habits are vital to strengthening and maintaining the flow of spiritual life within us. They help us to be supplied with the Spirit (Gal. 3:5), walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16), and abide in our spiritual union with Christ (as discussed in earlier lessons).

Feeding upon the word of God

The Bible is absolutely critical to our spiritual life. Here are but a few of many passages that support this fact:

“But He [Jesus] answered and said, ‘It is written, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.”’” (Matt. 4:4)

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.” (Jn. 6:63)

“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” (Rom. 10:17)

Victorious believers actually use the Bible in different ways. There is no single way, or set of ways, that is absolutely best for every believer. Each believer needs to find which methods of using the Bible seem to satisfy his spiritual needs best. I use the term “spiritual” need purposely. Although all of us need some mental understanding of God’s word, we should certainly not limit our use of the Bible to the intellectual realm. Our human spirit, which is distinct from our mind (part of our soul), must be fed by God’s word. This is vital for true spiritual life. The first suggestion I have for handling the Bible I will term as “feeding on the word of God.” Feeding on the word may also be called meditating. The concept of feeding upon God’s word is definitely in the Bible. I will quote just one passage below. You can look up other references (such as Ps. 119:103). There are also a number of verses that specifically mention meditation.

“Thy words were found and I ate them, and Thy words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I have been called by Thy name, O Lord God of hosts.” (Jer. 15:16)

Indeed, if you read John 6:48-63 you will see that Christ is identifying Himself as the real manna, the bread which is necessary for spiritual life. Yet, Jesus pointed out that it was His words which give spirit and life, not His flesh. By this statement, He was implying that His words must be “eaten” to experience Himself as the life-giving manna.

Feeding, or meditating, on God’s word is different than just reading it. With feeding there is a chewing. Instead of reading right through a passage, one takes his time to chew the phrases, often going over them more than once, so that the nourishment in them is absorbed into our hearts. It seems natural that meditation on the Scripture includes spontaneous prayer mingled with the word. Joshua was told to meditate on God’s word in order to have success in entering the good land (Jos. 1:8). The psalmist speaks of the man who meditates in God’s word day and night (Ps. 1:2). George Müller, the great saint of the 1800s, spoke of the blessing of meditating upon the word of God each morning. In Appendix A there is an article he has written describing his way of mediation.

The Hebrew verb for meditate in these verses (Jos. 1:8; Ps. 1:2) is *haga* (Strong's #1897), which means to moan or mutter. A respected reference work indicates that the fundamental meaning of *haga* is a low sound and that the use of this word for "meditating" may mean that the Scriptures were read half out loud during such meditation.¹ Thus, this idea of feeding on the word seems to involve reading the Bible aloud in God's presence in a prayerful way.

Let me get more specific as to this practice of meditating, or feeding, on the word. I do this especially early in the morning, usually not long after rising. The biographies of great Christians often point to the practice of a "quiet time" early in the morning. David the psalmist wrote, "In the morning, O Lord, Thou wilt hear my voice; in the morning I will order my prayer to Thee and eagerly watch" (Ps. 5:3).

A morning quiet time may include prayer and singing, but a significant portion of time should probably be devoted to the Scriptures, with mediation as a suggested way. I have found that it helps to pray over the word sequentially through a book of the Bible, particularly the New Testament books, or a psalm. In this way, the idea of the writing becomes clearer because one is going over God's word in context. This matter of "praying over," or with, the word of God is seen in the following passage in Ephesians:

"And **take** THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is **the word of God**.

With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints." (Eph. 6:17-18)

The translation above shows that the word of God is taken **with** prayer, in the Spirit. Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest, in his expanded translation, renders the verses this way:

"And **take** the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God; **through the instrumentality of every prayer** and supplication for need, praying at every season by means of the Spirit, and maintaining a constant alertness in the same with every kind of unremitting care and supplication for all the saints." (Eph. 6:17-18, Wuest)

Here are some helpful hints. Find a quiet place and begin by opening in prayer to God. Remember, the whole reason you are there is to come into God's presence, to seek His face and draw spiritual sustenance from Him. You are seeking to be fed by the Spirit of God; meditation is different than Bible reading or Bible study. Start praying over the verses in the selected passage slowly.

For example, if you are feeding upon the book of Philippians, you may start by just praying out loud the first phrase of the book in God's presence: "Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:1a). To gain the spiritual nourishment of this phrase, you may repeat this phrase more than once until you feel you are ready to move on. As you do this, you may be impressed with some thought or inspiration within. For example, the term "bond-servants" may impress you with a desire to be a bond-servant. That may lead you to pray to the Lord, "Oh, Lord, I want to be Your bond-servant. Work in my life to make me a bond-servant like Paul was." Or, perhaps, the Spirit will impress you to pray for someone you know, concerning the matter of that person being a bond-servant. Or, you may be led to praise God for all that He accomplished through Paul and Timothy.

It may be that you do not feel to pray anything concerning this phrase. You may simply enjoy it for a few moments before passing on to the next phrase. I suspect as you do this you will find that your reading and praying over the word are in low tones, since you are just alone there with God.

¹ *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*.

Thus, the moaning or muttering indicated by the Hebrew word for meditation often proves to be true. I have also found that praying and reading out loud helps keep away distracting thoughts. In addition, it seems that the word makes more of an impression upon me when I not only see it, but also hear it.

Another helpful hint in meditating is to personalize your prayer over Scripture. For example, I was praying over 1 Jn. 3:2 this morning. It reads as follows: "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him just as He is" (1 Jn. 3:2). In my prayer I prayed, "Now I am a child of God, and it has not appeared as yet what I shall be. I know that when You appear, Lord, I shall be like You, because I shall see You just as You are." One can also try emphasizing different words to get the richness out of the phrase. For example, one might pray, "I **shall** be like You." This emphasis will give faith to our spirit of the certainty of this truth.

What should one expect when one feeds upon the word? Usually there will be some degree of inner satisfaction within our spirit. This will vary from day to day. Sometimes we may become joyful by something we have "eaten." Sometimes we will get a fresh understanding of Scripture, or an application to our lives. At other times we may be very sobered by our quiet time and be full of desire for holiness.

Quite often, though, we may not have strong feelings like this. The time may seem very "normal" or routine, even though we have tried to seek God earnestly. We should not gauge our quiet time by feelings. Rather, we should put our trust in what God tells us that the Scripture will do for us and in us. As we spend time in feeding upon the Scripture, we will receive some measure of spiritual life (Jn. 6:57-58, 63). The Bible also promises us that we are sanctified by the word of God. Jesus prayed for us: "Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth" (Jn. 17:17).

I want stress the importance of being in the Scriptures at the start of every day, if at all possible. Of course, we are not under any legal requirement, so if for some reason you miss a day do not condemn yourself. The point is to aim at making it a priority in your life so that you can be the Christian you want to be. Also, once you start to have such a daily time, you will establish a habit that will stick, especially when you realize the help it renders you. Jesus told us plainly that we need God's word to live spiritually, just as we need our daily bread to live physically (Matt. 4:4). Also, I must frankly admit that I am against the use of devotional books during a morning quiet time. These books usually quote a verse or two and then have a page of commentary for reading. I personally believe that these devotionals cheat the believer from hearing directly from God about the verse, and they circumvent feeding upon the Scripture itself for sustenance. If you really like a particular devotional book, may I suggest you read it later in the day.

The process of meditating can continue from time to time throughout the day. One thing I do during the work week is to write down a key verse from my morning passage on a small card. Then, I place that card in front of me at my desk and continue to feed on it inwardly from time to time. Also, verses that are memorized can be meditated upon throughout the day, although this must often be done silently if you are around others. Sometimes you may want to feed upon Scripture again in the evening, or that time may be a time you reserve for reading or studying Scripture. The consistent testimony of saints throughout the ages indicates that a morning time spent with God, before the busyness of the day begins, is important. If there is no consistency to having such a quiet time, the victorious life may well be elusive.

LESSON 18

Practices of the Overcomer – Handling the Word of God (continued)

Besides feeding, or meditating, upon Scripture there are some other valuable ways for the believer to handle the word of God. These would be reading the Bible, studying the Bible and memorizing Scripture.

Reading the Bible

Reading the Bible is extremely vital for the child of God. Not only does faith come in this way (Rom. 10:17), but it is only through reading, and prayerful searching of the Scriptures, that the believer can gain insight into Biblical principles, doctrines, important Bible stories and characters, God's plan as played out throughout the ages, etc.

Of course, we can learn these things from Bible teachers or others, but the truths of the Bible become more real to us when we read them ourselves. When we learn things directly from Scripture, I do believe that they stick with us more than by getting the information second hand from others. However, fellow believers can help reinforce or adjust our concepts of Bible truths, and that is important. We should be open to learn from others.

On the other hand, it is only when we are reading the Bible ourselves diligently that we can spot where a teacher might be off, or even a false teacher. I recall being in a large Bible conference a few years ago when a popular author made a statement about the children of Israel. Because I had read the Old Testament quite a few times, I instantly knew that his statement, in which he was making application to our experience, was wrong. I wonder how many other people there realized that. Perhaps many in the audience accepted what he said without questioning it. After all, he was a famous author on Bible themes.

I would encourage every believer to read the Bible every day. One of the best ways is to be on a reading plan that covers the entire Bible in a year. We need to read all of the books of the Bible in order to get a complete understanding of God and His ways with men. Most Christian book stores carry small pamphlets that contain a reading plan for reading the Bible annually. Also, Christian websites with Bible tools usually have plans you can follow. It only takes about fifteen to twenty minutes a day to read through the Bible in a year.

No matter how one reads the Bible, it is important to do so regularly. It should be a daily habit (Matt. 4:4). Victorious Christians are people who are in the Scriptures, reading them and absorbing them. You may recall that in an earlier lesson it was pointed out that the Bible is the "language" that God uses to speak to His people. If Bible texts and stories are not familiar to us, then God will not be able to use them to speak to us as we live our lives. He may speak to us not only when we are reading a passage, but also when we are engaged in daily affairs. The Holy Spirit will often take a verse from our memory and bring it to mind at the right moment (Jn. 14:26).

When we read the Bible we should be careful to quiet our hearts before God and be open to Him. We should read with a seeking and prayerful spirit. If we do not turn our hearts to Him in sincerity to hear and learn from Him, then the Bible will be a veiled book to us. However, if we open up to Him, then the Holy Spirit has a way to make the Bible alive and meaningful to us.

But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; **but whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.** Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. (2 Cor. 3:14-17)

We should also remember that any time spent in the word of God with our hearts open to Him, whether we are reading or meditating or searching the Scriptures, will result in our being sanctified unto God. This means that the Scripture has an effect of counteracting the pull of the world and its lusts upon us. “Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth” (Jn. 17:17). Certainly, then, we can see the necessity of being in the Scriptures in order to be victorious.

I recognize that some believers, especially in third world countries, cannot read. Such believers should take advantage of every alternative opportunity to get into the word of God. For example, those who can read may read to those who cannot. Various electronic means can also be used to have the Scriptures read aloud to the illiterate.

This may be an appropriate place to comment on the reading of Christian books other than the Bible, such as spiritual books, biographies, commentaries, etc. One can certainly get some spiritual help from good books. There are so many books available today, however, that the mass is overwhelming. Which ones are really worthwhile? Unfortunately, many are not.

It is very difficult to advise you in this area. If you know of a godly and mature Christian, their input may be helpful on the selection of books. Regrettably, however, there is confusion today even on some fundamental issues (such as law versus grace as noted in earlier lessons). So, even some more mature Christians may still not have the best discernment. The more you read your Bible and grow, the more discernment you will develop (see Phil. 1:9-10). Nevertheless, I encourage you to read the best books you can find.

Searching the Scriptures

I know that for many readers this topic is daunting. You may imagine that now I am going to tell you to learn Greek, buy stacks of lexicons and commentaries, and spend many hours trying to analyze difficult Bible passages! Be encouraged, I am not going to do that! Only those called as teachers or elders may have to do that. But, every saint, even the sisters (who are not supposed to teach doctrine in the assembly – 1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-14), needs to spend time occasionally searching the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). The basic reason we search the Scripture is to learn the truth from God. Whereas the teacher of God's word may learn in order to teach, as well as apply the truth to his life, every saint has things they need to learn from God in order to follow Him and be pleasing to Him. That is surely needed if we are to live the victorious Christian life.

As we progress in our Christian life there will be questions and issues along the way that need to be resolved for us if we are serious about following Jesus. It is at least at these times that we need to search the Scriptures in order to learn from God what He wants us to do. I could give many examples.

For instance, suppose you are a fairly new Christian and are quite excited about the Christian life. Then perhaps a colleague at work learns of your interest and begins to share with you about growing spiritually. Perhaps that co-worker begins to share with you that to be more spiritual you need to speak in tongues. Maybe he or she even gives you a booklet to read concerning the subject, or presents some verses. What should you do? That is the time to search the Scriptures!

A good approach would be to use a concordance to look up all of the passages concerning speaking in tongues. You may see cross-references to other verses that could be pertinent. Of course, you would do all of this prayerfully before the Lord, asking Him to guide you into the truth. In addition, on many subjects, you will find that there is literature available by preachers or teachers who want to expound their view on some question. You may certainly benefit from this, but a safe approach would be to read the best literature on each side of the discussion (Pr. 18:17).

Also, if you are a woman, you would be wise to realize that God has given men the assignment of interpreting doctrine, and you should ask your believing husband (or Christian father, if unmarried) for help before you make a final judgment on any Biblical question (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-14).

Searching the Scriptures can be helpful for many areas in our lives. When a couple has children, then that certainly opens the door to a new area of experience, concerning which they should consult God's word. Every husband and every wife needs to find and meditate on the Scriptures given for husbands and wives in the Bible (e. g., 1 Cor. 7, 11; Eph. 5; 1 Pet. 3, etc.) Finances are a big issue, and we believers should search the Scripture concerning our use of money and the issue of debt. After all, we are accountable to God for our stewardship.

The list of topics goes on and on, but fundamentally we should realize that as questions or issues arise in our lives, we should not just take what others say about them. We should certainly not let tradition dictate our path. All of us can at least look up the verses involved in order to see what God would speak to us. Be sure to read the cross-reference verses too. You will be surprised how much you learn from this simple exercise if you are truly seeking to learn and follow the truth. Commentaries and books can be helpful or not. You may use them, but realize that they are imperfect. Don't go to a commentary as the arbiter of a question. Keep seeking the Lord if the issue is still not clear.

The basic principle that I wish to convey here is that the overcomer wants to hear from God concerning the truth. That is why the victorious Christian should not be afraid of going to the Bible himself or herself in order to search out a matter. This was the attitude of the noble Bereans (Acts 17:11).

There are lots of Bible tools available. There are many study Bibles, which have all sorts of various helps. Every believer should have at least a Bible with a good verse cross-reference system. A fairly comprehensive concordance will help, as well as an English dictionary to get an accurate understanding of words. Today, there are many helps available for free on the Internet. For example, at www.crosswalk.com there is a Bible study tools section that has a Bible word search program, concordances, dictionaries, lexicons, commentaries, etc. Another excellent site with study tools is www.studylight.org. Take advantage of these free on-line tools. Also, a Bible software program called "e-Sword" may be downloaded for free at www.e-sword.net. This is an excellent, comprehensive program. A donation may be made for the program if one wishes to do so.

I do want to recommend one book, which will help you learn the principles for sound Biblical interpretation. Unfortunately, believers violate these principles regularly, and thus they end up with erroneous interpretations of Bible texts. The book is entitled *How to Understand Your Bible*, and it is written by T. Norton Sterrett. It can be ordered through any Christian bookstore.

Finally, searching the Scriptures can be a very rewarding experience. After the labor is finished, you will often find that you have a clear answer from God about how to follow Him in an issue of life. It is very satisfying to know that you have heard directly from God and have His mind. That will give you great confidence to follow Him, even if others disagree with your path. Often overcomers are directed down a narrow path that others are not taking.

Memorizing Scripture

Memorizing Scripture can be very helpful to the believer. The benefit of memorizing Scripture seems to be threefold. Firstly, as we memorize the Holy Spirit can use that process to feed us and enlighten us. Secondly, the memorized verse can be available for the Holy Spirit to bring to our mind at the right time to guide us in our Christian life. Thirdly, the verse can also be available to be shared with others, whether when witnessing to unbelievers or when helping fellow

believers. These are great benefits and the biographies of famous Christians often speak of the practice of memorizing Scripture. Therefore, I encourage you to do so.

Yet, in my own experience, I have found that the first two benefits can also be gained just from reading and meditating on the word of God. My experience, however, may be different from that of others. I am familiar enough with the Bible from reading it and meditating on it over the years that a great many verses can come to mind without memorizing them (of course, my recollection of them is not word-perfect). Also, I have found that memorized verses do not stick with me on a word-perfect basis for very long. Still, I definitely believe that key verses, such as those of our union with Christ for example, are important to memorize. These are verses that we may want to claim every day.

I encourage you to select at least those verses for memory that seem very important to you. These may be verses that help you maintain peace or help you claim victory. In other words, memorize those verses that will be keys for you in living a victorious life.

Some good identification verses for memorization would be Romans 6:6-7; 7:4, 6; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 2:20; 6:14; and Col. 3:3-4. Other good verses to consider would be 1 Cor. 10:13; Phil. 4:6-7; Heb. 4:16; 10:19-20; 1 Pet. 5:6-8; 1 Jn. 1:9. Then, you may want to branch out and try to memorize other portions of God's word and see how that benefits you. However, you should not feel that there is a demand upon you to continually memorize Scripture in order to be victorious. Most of us can write down verses, or use a Bible to read them, when we want to meditate on them during the day. Christians who live under persecution, however, are much more likely to need to memorize Scripture.

Finally, let us always remember that we should come to the Scriptures to find Jesus, and to enhance our relationship with Him. We should seek truth in order to fit into His plan for our lives. It is possible to get sidetracked looking for "knowledge" alone, which will take us away from knowing Him as our life. The Pharisees were supposed experts in the Bible, but had no real heart for God. Jesus never praised them, but instead kept focusing on their "heart problem." Here is what He said to them, as recorded in the gospel of John: "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life" (Jn. 5:39-40). Let us learn from this negative example, and come to the Bible in order to know Him and follow Him.

LESSON 19

Practices of the Overcomer - Prayer

I am sure that the reader is not surprised that prayer is a key practice of the victorious Christian. What might surprise you is the particular kind of prayer that I will stress as the key to overcoming. I don't believe that the overcomer must be a great prayer warrior who spends two to three hours on his or her knees a day. This intercessory role appears to be the calling of only a very few. Most of us do not have the time, or the spiritual energy, regardless of our dedication, to carry out this type of prayer activity.

Prayer, however, is a vital secret to the victory of the believer. The type of prayer that I believe you will find most prevalent among victorious Christians is prayer that consists of dozens of little prayers to God throughout the day. In addition, the victorious believer will try to maintain a prayerful spirit at every moment, whereby he or she is dependently "looking unto Jesus" (Heb. 12:2, KJV). The best verse to describe this prayer activity would be: "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17).

Prayer is the most concrete demonstration of our dependence upon God. And dependence upon God is a key element of a living faith. Prayer is contacting the living God in the Spirit (Eph. 6:18; Heb. 4:16; 10:19-22). It is no wonder, then, that the result of a secret inner prayer life throughout the day is spiritual victory and growth. Let us look at some examples and some verses.

The victorious believer is the one who is very cognizant of his weakness (2 Cor. 12:10; 13:4). Therefore, this saint will often pray little prayers so that they can handle circumstances or people in their lives. Here are some examples: "Lord, I can't handle these children today. I need You. Lord Jesus, I am trusting You to be my patience with them today." "Lord, I can't handle this workload today. Grant me Your grace to do what I need to get done today."

Upon seeing a difficult person approach, the believer may just pray, "Thank You, Lord, I was crucified with You, and now You are my life." Thus, the believer is looking unto the Lord to be able to speak to that person with his old life (which may be unfriendly and critical) put away by the cross, and his new life in Christ being manifested.

Actually, as a Christian grows in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, he will realize that Christ is needed even for things that he is capable of "handling" in his own effort. The believer begins to recognize that things done in the energy and ability of the flesh (the natural life) do not glorify God, although our fellow man may see nothing wrong with these efforts. For example, let us say that one is good at his or her job. During the workday such an overcoming Christian may pray, "Lord, I don't want to do this assignment in myself. I am looking to You for Your life in this work. Be glorified in this, Lord Jesus."

There are many examples we could give of these little prayers that show such a constant dependence upon the Lord, and a drawing of grace from Him. Consider the matter of human anxieties. We are often anxious for many things. But, the victorious Christian will find himself bringing the smallest of needs to His Lord. This is in accordance with God's desire for us. "Be anxious in nothing, but **in everything** by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6).

We may pray for ourselves for the smallest of our needs. For example, an anxious mother may pray, "Lord, we don't have any money to buy Billy some new shoes. You know he needs them, Lord. Oh, Lord, meet this need." Or, the prayer could be for something even much smaller. "Lord Jesus, strengthen me to get these dishes done quickly and get Billy in the car so that we can get to the doctor's office on time."

On the other hand, we may pray for others in small prayers as they come to mind, “Lord, please minister Your grace to Sally today in her difficult family situation. Draw her to Yourself, Lord.” We should realize that God’s Spirit may very well be bringing other saints to mind. There is much spiritual work to be done in the building up of Christ’s body through prayer, including these little prayers for one another. God puts others on our heart so that we can intercede for them.

If we truly prayed for all of our anxieties and concerns, great and small, we would have a busy prayer life during the day. This would give us much contact with God and help us be strengthened spiritually.

Victorious believers make a habit out of bringing their problems to God. They truly look to Him for solutions. Unfortunately, many Christians make only a token effort to come to the Lord with their problems and challenges. Too often they eagerly seek out the advice or the help of pastors or others, instead of first waiting upon God and really seeking Him. God may indeed lead us to ask others for help, but we should all learn the lesson of truly looking to Him as our Good Shepherd for help.

One of the shortest prayers that I believe you will often find in the hearts of overcomers is “Thank You, Lord.” The Bible advises us: “In **everything** give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:18). We may thank Him for keeping us safe during our drive home. We may thank Him for having a job today. We may thank Him for providing a simple lunch for us. We may thank Him for meeting any small need.

Overcomers also recognize that God is at work in every circumstance in their lives. Moreover, by giving thanks to God in our circumstances we are reminded that God is in control and sovereign, and that He allows problems for the benefit of our growth. This helps us put problems in perspective and helps us trust Him. So, when a brother arrives home from work to find his household in disorder, instead of getting upset, he should thank the Lord. This will help him deal with things in the Spirit.

Let me tell you the story of a sister I knew. She was driving at night and got lost. She turned into a construction site to get reoriented. An overzealous security guard approached her and then shot her in the eye. The first thing she did was thank the Lord for the situation. Surely that helped her be victorious in that unimaginably difficult situation. Fortunately, her husband was following her in another car and they got her to the hospital. Miraculously, although the bullet entered the brain, the only damage done was the loss of her eye.

The attitude of a prayerful spirit, and a readiness to voice a prayer when needed, is also a key to overcoming temptation. When Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane and facing the prospect of the cross, He faced a decision to choose the cross or to bypass it. He was strengthened to follow God’s path by praying three times to His Father. It was at this time that Jesus instructed His disciples: “**Keep watching and praying**, that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41).

Again, let me give some examples of short prayers in this regard. Perhaps a man has to deal with an attractive woman at work. He may pray, “Lord, thank you that my old man was crucified with You on the cross. I have been raised up with You to walk in newness of life.” Or, perhaps a group of coworkers is planning an outing that appeals to your flesh, but you have the sense that God does not want you to be enjoying such an entertainment. You may be strengthened to stand with the Lord’s choice by praying, “The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14).

Have you been impressed that the verses quoted show that a prayer life should be going on continually in the life of a believer? “Pray **without ceasing**” (1 Thess. 5:17). “**In everything** by prayer and supplication” (Phil. 4:6). “**In everything** give thanks” (1 Thess. 5:18). “**Keep watching and praying**” (Matt. 26:41). It is the constant looking away unto Jesus with a

prayerful spirit, and the many small prayers throughout the day, that give us a strong connection to Jesus, the Vine. Our spiritual life is built up in this way. "But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit" (Jude 1:20).

Finally, there is another very short prayer that I have found to be very beneficial. It involves simply calling upon the name of Jesus. It seems that the early Christians practiced calling out loud upon His name. Saul apparently identified believers by this practice, as Ananias stated that "he [Saul] has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon Your name" (Acts 9:14).

Also, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, his letter addressed "the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2). Later in his epistle Paul stated "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3b). In the Greek, this literally reads "no one can say 'Lord Jesus,' except in the Holy Spirit." This means that when we call upon the Lord's name (in sincerity), we will be in the Holy Spirit.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul advised him to "pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart" (2 Tim. 2:22). By turning our hearts to Jesus and calling "Lord Jesus" we are in brought into the Spirit. I have found that I can utter His name in a whispered way during the day and be in touch with Him. I am strengthened in my spirit whenever I do this. If you have not tried this, I recommend that you do so.

Of course, the Bible encourages us to pray in different ways, and even to have seasons devoted to prayer (1 Cor. 7:5). However, in this lesson my burden has been to reveal that the most necessary prayer habit for being victorious is that of a constant prayerful spirit and many little prayers to God throughout our day. I hope this lesson will be an encouragement to you to pray more in this way.

LESSON 20

Practices of the Overcomer – Maintaining a Blameless Conscience

This final key practice of victorious Christians cannot be overemphasized. It is of the utmost importance, for, as we shall see, our walk and testimony can utterly fail, perhaps even for the balance of our lifetime, if we ignore the voice of the conscience. The conscience is a God-given faculty of our human spirit. It is operative, on a greatly diminished level, even in unbelievers (Rom. 2:14-15). When a person is born again, his spirit is enlivened, and thus the sensitivity of his conscience is dramatically enhanced (Eph. 4:17-19; Rom. 6:21; Rom. 8:10).

The conscience of man functions to monitor his thoughts, words, motives and actions in light of what the person understands to be good and evil. The conscience testifies to a person whether one is upholding or violating the moral standards he acknowledges as true.

If we violate our accepted standards of good and evil, then we feel uneasiness and guilt. “And it came about afterward that David’s conscience [lit., heart] bothered him because he had cut off the edge of Saul’s robe” (1 Sam 24:5; see also 2 Sam. 24:10).

If we live according to our accepted moral code, then we feel affirmed within as being correct. “I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 9:1). “For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you” (2 Cor. 1:12).

To the believer, then, the conscience is his inward advisor as to whether he is sinning or obeying God. The conscience is very helpful because it not only condemns us after we sin, but it also warns us that we may be about to sin, and thus we have a chance to avert sinning if we take grace from God at that moment.

Sin breaks our fellowship with God, and this is the point that has so much to do with our victory. Our conscience can warn us that we are about to sin, and we can heed that warning and thus be victorious. On the other hand, when we do sin, and we all do, it is vital that the break in our fellowship with God be fully restored. If our fellowship with God is clouded by sin that is not dealt with, then we will surely be on the path to more defeat, perhaps even to the point of losing our faith completely. Therefore, we must make dealing with the issues of our conscience the utmost priority in our practice. Paying attention to our conscience, then, is a great part of our sanctification process.

Maintaining a blameless conscience

The apostle Paul was certainly an excellent model for us in this matter. How he dealt with his conscience was one of the secrets of his spiritually powerful life. When he appeared before the chief priests and the Sanhedrin (the council of Jewish leaders) to give his defense, he opened his address with this statement: “Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day” (Acts 23:1). Then, a short while later he made this statement before the Roman governor, Felix: “In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men” (Acts 24:16). In the King James Version this verse reads: “And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God, and toward man” (Acts 24:16, KJV). I think the phrase “void of offense” is helpful as it includes the action of clearing up a violated conscience.

Paul was saying that he lived by the dictates of his conscience. If his conscience forbade something, he avoided it. If his conscience approved something, then he proceeded. He tried to live “before God” by

only doing God's will. And, he tried to maintain a good conscience toward man by conducting himself honorably in the sight of his fellow man (Rom. 12:17; 2 Cor. 8:20-21; 1 Pet. 2:12). When he sinned towards God or man, Paul took immediate steps to clear his conscience of that offense.

Clearing the conscience of offenses

In order to have an unclouded communion with God and live in victory, we must clear our conscience of offenses. Regarding dealing with our offenses toward God, this involves a genuine repentance and confession. Most all of us are familiar with First John 1:9. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9). The Greek verb meaning "to confess" is *homologeō*. In the literal sense it means to speak the same thing or same word.

Our conscience always speaks to us in a specific way, concerning a specific action, word, attitude or thought that is wrong. We must confess, agree, that the specific thing we have done is wrong. General confessions like "Pardon and forgive us all our sins" will not avail before God. We must humble ourselves to accept the condemnation of our conscience in each specific instance. Further, if this agreement with the inward judgment is genuine, we will certainly take steps to pursue a different course. Otherwise, our "confession" is a sham. "He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy" (Pr. 28:13, NKJV).

The Chinese Bible teacher Watchman Nee gives an excellent illustration of the conscience, likening it to a window which must be cleaned in order to allow God's light to enter our spirit and give us unhindered communion with Him. God's light can shine into our being through the conscience of our spirit, thus showing us where we are wrong in our actions, attitudes or words. If we respond in confession to God's condemnation of our wrongdoings, then this window of our conscience becomes clean, allowing for future light and even greater light. On the other hand, if we do not confess our sins, our conscience becomes damaged and the window becomes cloudy. Therefore, we can see less of God's light and His voice becomes more muted. If this pattern continues, it is possible for a genuine believer to sin without any feeling of being wrong. The believer is then on a dangerous path of living further and further away from God, His truth and His righteousness.

Sometimes a believer will hear the voice of his conscience, but try to reason against the protest of his conscience with his mind. Through such mental arguments he will try to convince himself that his actions are justified. However, it is a great mistake to overrule the work of the conscience with our reasoning. We should take care to be sure that we respond to the condemnation of the conscience and not try to reason its condemnation away. This does not mean that we should not use our mind to understand God's inward working, according to Scripture. It means that we should be aware of the tendency of the flesh to justify one's self and be on guard against it, taking a position of humility before God to rightly respond to the work of the Holy Spirit in our conscience.

A second method that Christians may use in order to suppress the protest of the conscience is to do good works in lieu of dealing with the specific point of disobedience. However, this method also fails to satisfy the demands of conscience. What God requires is confession and repentance concerning our disobedience, not additional service to appease Him. "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22b, KJV).

Once we have made our confession of specific sin, we need to trust in God's promise in First John 1:9 that He does forgive us and cleanse us. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9). He is faithful to forgive us, because He is faithful to His word concerning forgiveness in Christ (Acts 10:43). He can be righteous in forgiving our sins because of the blood of Jesus (Rom. 3:25-26).

We must place our faith in Jesus' blood to forgive our every sin. The devil may try to imitate the condemnation of our conscience after our confession. Satan is the accuser of the brethren, and we must reject His accusations after we have truly confessed our sin. We should praise and thank God for the

blood of Jesus and His forgiveness when such an attack starts, and we need to resist the devil and tell him that we will not accept his accusation.

We also need to take care of clearing our conscience of offenses toward man. Many times when we mistreat others our conscience will not give us peace solely from our confession to God. It is also pressing us to clear up the offense with our fellow man by going to them for forgiveness. An example of this is found in Matthew. "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering" (Matt. 5:23-24).

From the context, we can see that in this example the offense toward the brother would be that of calling him a name (see Matt. 5:22). Although Jesus mentions the altar, because at that time the disciples were still practicing Jews, this term would also picture our going to God for fellowship in prayer in the New Testament economy. After doing something offensive to a brother, our conscience may bother us as we approach the throne of grace. This is God's signal to us that we must clear up the offense by going to that brother in repentance and asking for forgiveness (see Luke 17:4). It is only by doing this (and confessing our sin to God) that the offense can be removed from our conscience and we can be at peace. In the same way, we also need to clear up offenses toward unbelievers. Paul testified: "And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God and toward men" (Acts 24:16, KJV).

LESSON 21

The Conscience of the Believer

There is the need to say more about the conscience so that the believer can understand this inner function that is so crucial to his spiritual life.

The conscience and knowledge

Our conscience is understandably influenced by our concepts of what is right and wrong. Scripture makes this very clear (see especially 1 Cor. 8, 10 and Rom. 14). The passages noted speak of believers who have different understandings of what is acceptable to God, and thus their consciences are affected differently by the same matter.

A foremost Scriptural example would be the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. Of course, that topic had much more meaning to those early believers, many of whom came out of cultures that worshipped idols and sacrificed meat to those idols. This meat could later be sold in an idol's temple, or in the meat market for anyone to eat (1 Cor. 8:10; 10:25). Some believers, whose life before Christ included contact with idols, were very sensitive toward anything to do with idols.

Because of their revulsion of idols, some believers felt that to eat meat sacrificed to an idol would be a sin in God's eyes. If they ate such meat, their conscience would condemn them as sinning. On the other hand, the apostle Paul's teaching tells us that some who were more mature in the Lord came to an understanding that idols in themselves were merely blocks of wood, not gods, and meat that had been set in front of them was not defiled (1 Cor. 8:4). Also, these ones who were stronger in the faith realized that in God's New Testament economy eating or not eating certain things has nothing to do with God's approval of us (1 Cor. 8:8; Rom. 14:14, 17). Such believers had "liberty" to eat things that others condemned in their consciences (1 Cor. 8:9; Rom. 14:22-23).

By these passages we can see that a believer's conscience is shaped by his knowledge. Scripture here also shows us that believers can have different views on what is sin and what is not on some matters that are not clearly defined morally in the New Testament. Additionally, if you read these passages carefully, you will see that Paul is encouraging the preservation of each believer's personal walk before God by means of one's own conscience. Each one should live before God according to his own convictions of mind, with their subsequent affect upon the individual's conscience (Rom. 14:2-8, 22-23).

Moreover, we should be very careful about damaging another Christian's conscience by emboldening them to follow our example in matters (which are not clearly defined morally) where they do not yet have the spiritual knowledge to do so (Rom. 14:14-15, 21-23; 1 Cor. 8:9-13). In fact, if we do this, we damage the building up of the body of Christ (Rom. 14:19-20), and are guilty of sin in this very matter (1 Cor. 8:11-12).

Although knowledge and the conscience are closely related, let us not confuse the two. Knowledge is something we hold in our mind (part of our soul), whereas conscience is a function of our spirit. We are three part beings, with a body, a soul and a spirit (1 Thess. 5:23). The soul, with the mind, is very close to the spirit, and the Bible shows that a sharp two-edged sword is needed to divide, and thus differentiate between the two (Heb. 4:12). We should always live unto God by contacting Him in our spirit (Jn. 4:24; 2 Tim. 4:22).

Therefore, we must be careful not to live directly by our knowledge of what is sin and what is righteousness. To do this is to regress to the independent life of the self, and to live from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:17, KJV). Rather, we should strive to live in union with Christ and pay attention to our spirit, including the sense of our conscience in all matters. Actually, as we grow in

Christ, our conscience not only helps us evaluate what is right and wrong, but it also witnesses as to what is of God and what is merely of man (2 Cor. 1:12). Many doings of man, including Christian works, appear to be “good,” but they are not approved of God because He is not the author of them (1 Cor. 3:12-13; Eph. 2:10).

The conscience and our fellowship with God

If we have a clear understanding of the principles noted above, we can see that the conscience is not a perfect guide as to what God’s highest will is in an absolute sense. This is because our conscience is limited by our present knowledge concerning God and His will, and we all must “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).

As we grow in the Lord, we will condemn things in our life that we used not to condemn, and we may feel the liberty to do things that we earlier condemned. Yet, conscience, as a faculty of our reborn spirit, is God’s perfect guide for us in our present state. It is obedience to the guidance of our conscience that determines our present fellowship with Him. There are some critical verses in 1 John relating to this fellowship:

This is the message that we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. . . . If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 Jn. 1:5-9)

We see here that God is Light, which speaks of His absolute holy, moral character in contrast to the darkness of sin. To be in “fellowship with God” means that we are experiencing an intimate, up-to-date sharing of His holy, spiritual life. The verses above tell us that it is not possible to have this fellowship with God if indeed we are engaging in sin (walking in darkness). What is also being recognized here is that although God’s Light is absolute perfection, we have only a limited knowledge and a limited enlightenment of this perfection as it relates to our personal conduct at any time. At any given time we do not see all of our imperfections as measured against the perfection of God, or against the person of Christ. Our conscience, which is geared to our knowledge of spiritual truth, can only condemn us according to that standard of knowledge we have. **For us to “walk in the Light” means that our living is according to the light that we do have from God, which is in accordance with our present knowledge and the dictates of our conscience.** If we “walk in the Light” which He gives us in our being, then we experience “fellowship with one another,” and, importantly, “the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.” This means that as we respond to God’s enlightenment, which includes confession of our known sins to God, He also is cleansing us of all the unknown sins we do not see! So, even if there are shortcomings in our lives of which we have no consciousness, we can still have intimate fellowship with God.

As we grow in the knowledge of God’s truth our standard of light increases and our spiritual walk deepens. We come to know God more deeply and live in a higher measure of light. We thus become more sanctified, having our actual living reflect a higher degree of His holiness.

The dangers of a violated conscience

The Bible makes it very clear that if believers do not take care to keep a conscience void of offense they face grave spiritual danger. Let us look at some passages in this regard.

“But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and **a good conscience** and a sincere faith. For some men, **straying from these things**, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions” (1 Tim. 1:5-7).

To stray from maintaining a good conscience may put us on a course of serving God in vain and misleading others. Such a course could involve an unchecked, fleshly ambition to be a leader among God’s people (“wanting to be teachers,” 1Tim.1:7).

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars **seared in their own conscience** as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. (1 Tim. 4:1-3)

In the passage above we see certain liars propagating doctrines of demons. Such lying men have a conscience that has been seared. A seared conscience is one that has been so damaged as to be beyond feeling. This happens when a believer repeatedly violates his conscience and refuses to listen to its voice. The voice of the conscience grows more muted with each unremedied violation, until one cannot hear it at all. According to the context here, these are teachers in the church! What a sober warning this is for us to keep a good and sensitive conscience through confession and turning away from evil. If we do not do this, we may find ourselves cooperating with the demons in spreading false doctrine or doing some other evil.

“This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may fight the good fight, keeping faith and **a good conscience**, which **some have rejected and suffered shipwreck** in regard to their [lit., the] faith” (1 Tim. 1:18-19).

What a strong warning is here! This passage shows that our faith and a good conscience go together. However, if we reject a good conscience, our faith may leak out, eventually causing us to doubt even the fundamental doctrines of “the faith.” This is what happened to Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:19-20). Hymenaeus became a heretical teacher who damaged the church (2 Tim. 2:17-18), and the Alexander in 1 Tim. 1:20 may well be the Alexander who opposed Paul’s apostolic ministry (2 Tim. 4:14-15).

The fruitfulness of a good conscience

The Bible upholds the clear, or good conscience, as being of great value in God’s plan for the believer. Let us look at some very positive Scriptures on this topic.

“But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and **a good conscience** and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5).

Love is the supreme and overarching virtue that God desires from us (Jn. 13:34-35; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:14). In this verse from First Timothy we see that a good conscience is needed in order for love to flow from us.

“Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with **a clear conscience**. And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach” (1 Tim. 3:9-10).

Here we see that those who have a tested character, holding the faith with a clear conscience, are worthy to be assigned responsibility in serving the body of Christ.

“I thank God, whom I serve with **a clear conscience** the way my forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day” (2 Tim. 1:3).

This verse is from Paul's final letter, written shortly before he was martyred. This was his testimony as to how he had served God during his great apostolic ministry. If we wish to be useful to God, we must learn that the first requirement is to do all of our service, no matter how small, with a clear conscience. Any service that is not of this sort will be burned up at the Judgment Seat of Christ as wood, hay and stubble (1 Cor. 3:12-13).

A final word:

May the Lord impress all of us afresh with the need to deal with matters of conscience. Also, may He give us a heart to search out His truth and learn from Him so that we may grow in our understanding of His perfect will. We should not be living at a level of last year's knowledge. Each passing year should see our conscience develop so that it is more sensitive, touches more aspects of our living, and is more in line with God's model for us – Christ Himself.

LESSON 22

Challenges to the Overcomer

The victorious Christian in the Bible is called one who “overcomes.” The root verb for many of the passages using variations of the words victory, conquering or overcoming is the Greek word *nikao* (Strong’s #3528).

In this lesson and the next one we will examine a number of challenges to the overcomer. These are arenas where God wants His children to have victory. Commonly, Christians just think in terms of being victorious over sin. The Bible, however, presents a number of things for us to overcome. I fear that today many believers are not even aware of their failures in some of these areas. Therefore, it behooves us to seek the Lord about these matters that He may enlighten us as to His standards, showing us where He wants us to grow in His grace.

Overcoming the world

The Christian is to be victorious over the world (1 Jn. 5:4-5). The world, as used in First John, is a huge topic. The Greek word for world here is *kosmos* (Strong’s #2889), which has as its basic meaning order or arrangement. In reference to the believer, the word means the entire organized system of society in the present age with its influence upon men. The world system has many features to it, such as education, art, entertainment, commerce, fashion, “success,” family life and tradition, religion, and charitable enterprises.

The devil uses this system to deceitfully usurp people from loving God and doing His will (Eph. 2:2; Jas. 4:3-4; 1 Jn. 2:15-17; 5:19). The Old Testament pictures the world system by Egypt, where God’s people were held in bondage by Pharaoh (a type of the devil). Just as Pharaoh ruled over all Egypt, so Satan rules over this world system. “We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 Jn. 5:19).

You may recall that as long as the Israelites were in Egypt they were held back from worshipping and serving God (Ex. 4:22-23; 5:1-3). The Bible describes how mankind is ensnared by the world system, living their lives under its influence. In the following passage from Ephesians, we see how this system is outfitted to attract men to it by means of their lusts. These verses also reveal the working of Satanic forces, which both shape the world system and work in men to seduce them to fall into line with that system.

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince [Satan] of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. (Eph. 2:1-3)

Although this passage is portraying the lives of unbelievers, we should not think that believers are automatically delivered from the world and its influences. Any orthodox Bible teacher will tell you that the Christian has three enemies that he must deal with: the world, the flesh and the devil. To underscore the fact that Christians are still engaged in a battle with the world and its influence, we only need to look at two passages. When the apostle John wrote to believers, he admonished them: “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world” (1 Jn. 2:15). In the Greek, the sense of this command would more accurately be rendered as “Stop loving the world.”

In Romans, Paul commands us: “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and

perfect” (Rom. 12:2). Actually, the word translated as “world” in this verse is *aion*, for age. The Bible reveals that the world presents itself according to the fashion of the present age. Thus, Ephesians 2:2 speaks of the “course [*aion*] of this world [*kosmos*].” The passage cited in Romans indicates that believers must undergo a process of transformation so as to eliminate conformation to the present form of the world system.

The world entraps us with its allurements that appeal to the interests and desires of our natural life (the old man), our flesh. Just as a smorgasbord tempts the diner to pile his plate high with what seems appetizing to him, so the world presents an array of attractions suited for the different tastes of people. Satan does not just use the obviously sinful things of life to accomplish his purpose of keeping man from God and His will. He also uses the seemingly innocent, fun, or interesting things of this world system to attract and usurp both the believer and unbeliever alike.

If you like sports, the world has a highly developed “sports department” to interest and occupy you, so that you don’t have much motivation to seek God or meditate on His word. If you have an interest in a healthy lifestyle, there are countless books, magazines, videos, health food stores and Internet sites to occupy your heart and time. If you enjoy the arts, there are all kinds of books and activities to please you so that your service to God is short-circuited. Modern American society has been especially “super developed” in the matters of entertainment and recreation, with everything from theme parks to jet skis.

It seems that in America today the great majority of believers are entangled by the world system. Many want to enjoy all the pleasures that the unbelievers enjoy, except perhaps the immoral pleasures. As a result, many Christians are seeking to be rich, trying to build their stock portfolios in order to have a life of leisure now, or in retirement. They seek vacation homes, golf outings, sporting events, entertainment of all sorts, a larger home, a prestigious car, etc., in order to please themselves. But believers should beware. The devil has a subtle system designed to rob them of the full potential of their relationship with God, and their usefulness to Him.

The book of James teaches that trying to fulfill our lusts for things and pleasures turns us, God’s people, into God’s enemy:

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that **friendship with the world is hostility toward God**? Therefore, **whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.** (Jas. 4:1-4)

A major problem is that the believer’s love for the things of the world competes with his love for God. If we seek satisfaction in the things this world system has to offer us, then our love for God will dissipate and our desire for fellowship with God and fellow believers will wane. Unfortunately, we see this very thing happening to believers around us today. Many have no strong desire for God, or the things of God, because they have sought their satisfaction in the things of this world. The admonishment of the apostle John is so appropriate in this matter:

Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. **If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.** For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever. (1 Jn. 2:15-17)

How can we, as believers, tell when we are being usurped by the world, or when our participation in legitimate things like education, career, clothing, material possessions, and “clean” (not immoral) entertainment is in excess? We certainly cannot live by rules, which some congregations establish as

boundaries for “holy” living. That is legalism. We need to rely upon the individual guidance of the Holy Spirit, who resides in each believer. If the believer is willing to die to the world, then he or she should be open to the inner warnings of the Holy Spirit. Please refer to the quote from James 4 just three paragraphs above. That passage tells us that those believers who are “friends with the world” are committing spiritual “adultery” in their relationship with God. The verse immediately following tells us how the Holy Spirit is in us and yearns for us jealously in such a relationship with God. Thus, we can be sure that if we are truly sensitive to the Spirit who dwells within us, we should be able to tell when He is warning us that we are being unfaithful to God because of worldly lusts. Note how this verse shows us this jealous working of the Holy Spirit within: “Or do you not think that the Scripture says in vain, ‘The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously?’” (Jas. 4:5, NKJV).

The world not only tries to distract and occupy believers by enticing them to pursue riches and an overabundance of goods and pleasure, but it also tries to preoccupy us through the common, everyday affairs of life. This is why Jesus warned us of the grip that human relationships and common (not necessarily excessive) possessions may exercise upon us, keeping us from loving and following Him fully. Note the following passages, and consider them carefully.

“He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.” (Matt. 10:37)

“Jesus said, ‘Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life.’” (Mk. 10:29-30)

We must be willing to leave, in terms of heart attachment, and perhaps in actuality, the ordinary possessions and relationships of this life. I do not mean by this that one should abandon his family or his responsibilities. There may be times, however, when the Lord calls one into service that will require him to leave his job, his house, or perhaps even his loved ones for a while. Only by being willing to leave these potential entanglements can we fully follow the Lord and receive the reward (not eternal salvation) of abundant eternal life in “the age to come” – the coming Kingdom age of 1,000 years. Also, when the Lord speaks of the hundred-fold increase in the present age, he is speaking of the increased enjoyment of these things in our Christian family here on earth.

Religion as a part of the world system

There is one category of Satan’s world system that I have reserved for discussion until now. It is a category that holds particular peril for the believer, because of his desire for the things of God. That category is religion. We must see that the devil, in his subtlety, has had his hand very much at work in the field of religion, even Christianity. As always, his purpose is to keep men from experiencing their full potential in Christ, including their genuine usefulness to the Master. I can only highlight some elements of his tactics here, as the discussion of his crafty manipulation in this field throughout history would require a long discourse. I will only focus on how he distorts Christianity.

One of the tactics that Satan uses is ritualism and legalism. Note the passages below.

“But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless **elemental things** to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.” (Gal. 4:9-11)

Therefore, let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day – things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of angels . . . If you have died with Christ to

the **elementary principles of the world**, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using) – in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence. (Col. 2:16-18a; 20-23)

For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised, that they may boast in your flesh. But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which **the world** has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. (Gal. 6:13-15)

These passages show us that the world system includes “elementary principles,” which focus on rituals, such as circumcision, the observance of certain days and dietary rules. These outward regulations oppose the reality of Christ in our experience (Gal. 5:2; 6:15; Col. 2:8, 16-17). Often, such outward regulations are touted by religious leaders who base their teaching on Old Testament law. (See Lesson Six on freedom from the law).

Another tactic of Satan’s activity within the church is to warp Christian living by appealing to the fleshly desires of immature believers. Note the following passages.

“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies . . . for speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error.” (2 Pet. 2:1a, 18)

“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.” (2 Tim. 4:3-4)

Obviously, these passages could easily apply to any “prosperity gospel.” Yet, of additional concern, is the entertainment factor that seems to have influenced many Christian activities in America today. Is the Christian work or event based upon an appeal to the flesh in order to gain an audience? We must be very careful in our work not to use “ends” to justify the means. Our teaching and practice should emphasize the need for spiritual (not ascetic) self-denial. We should not utilize the desires and ways of the flesh to accomplish God’s work.

A very pervasive method of Satan is to introduce ideas or ways into God’s church or work that are not from God, thus producing a **religious mixture**. The church, ministry or activity having this mixture will have some elements that seem to belong to God, but other elements that do not.

The undiscerning and less mature Christian will accept the entire mixture because he sees something seemingly of God in it. He will not be bothered about the things that are not of God, unless they are overtly offensive.

The overcoming Christian, who has the mind and heart of God, realizes that any mixture is an offense to God’s holiness. Anything that is not purely of God will bother such a Christian. Such a believer will want to root out any ungodly or purely human elements, or not be willing to participate in any mixture. You can see how the Lord views such a mixture by reviewing His assessments of the seven churches in Asia in Revelation chapters two and three. Paul too wanted to root out the mixture of law and man’s ways in the churches. Unfortunately, today, in western Christianity, there is mostly an acceptance of mixture. Jesus prophesied that Christendom, as a whole, would become such an unholy mixture.

“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened.” (Matt. 13:33)

In this parable the meal represents the purity of Christ, especially in His humanity (as pictured in the meal offering of the Old Testament – Lev. 2:1-2). In the Bible, leaven is always representative of something that is evil in God's eyes (see the first mention of leaven in the Scriptures in Ex. 12:15 [unleavened, Gen. 19:3]).

In one New Testament example, immorality in the church in Corinth is viewed as leaven (1 Cor. 5:1-2, 6-8). Yet, God does not limit the evil of "leaven" to such obvious sins. The Lord Jesus warned His disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and Matthew records that this leaven was "the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:12b). Jesus also applied a quote from Isaiah to the Pharisees and scribes, accusing them of "teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" (Matt. 15:9b).

We see then that teaching that is not according to God, but is just man's concept, is at least one element of leaven in the religious mixture. There are other places in the New Testament where teachings according to man are condemned and seen as a danger to the church (Col. 2:21; 1 Tim. 1:3-9; Heb. 13:9). Some teaching in the church is clearly predicted by Timothy to have demons as its source (1 Tim. 4:1-3).

Another element of leaven in the religious mixture in Christendom is man's traditions. Jesus plainly stated that religious traditions can exist that invalidate the word of God (Mk. 7:13). The Bible also points out that tradition can not only oppose God's word, but it can even oppose Christ Himself, as seen in the following verse:

"See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the **tradition of men**, according to the elementary principles of the world, **rather than according to Christ.**" (Col. 2:8).

To build the church with man's ideas, man's teachings, man's energy, man's will, man's tradition or man's ways, is to introduce leaven into God's building. This is serious, and it is in accordance with this very problem that the apostle Paul warned the church in Corinth that a judgment day is coming in which the work of each believer will be tested, to see if it is according to man or according to God (1 Cor. 3:1-15). We need to look at the source of things in the church - are they from man, or are they from God? You can be sure that the enemy's working is behind what comes solely from man.

There are many unscriptural teachings and practices in the church today. What the Lord wants us to do is to clean out the leaven and not tolerate it. Christians are mostly complacent about the leaven, but the Lord definitely is not (see His word to the church in Thyatira, Rev. 2:20-23). To the church in Corinth, Paul wrote: "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened" (1 Cor. 5:6-7).

This is not the place for expounding the unscriptural beliefs and practices of Christendom, but I do implore Christians to seek God about this matter and not tolerate any mixture in their lives or Christian practice. For a start, I urge you to search the Scriptures and pray about such matters as legalistic principles, the clergy-laity system, denominationalism, and "Christian" holidays. You may want to read my booklet entitled "*Governing Principles for Building Up the Body of Christ*," where I delve into some of these matters (this booklet is available for download at www.seekersofchrist.org).

Overcoming the world in our daily life

The Bible presents two aspects of overcoming the world in 1 John 5:4-5. In verse four, we see that in one sense our victory is an accomplished fact: "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is **the victory that has overcome the world** – our faith" (1 Jn. 5:4). The latter part of this verse shows us our positional victory over the world by our initial faith. This victory was accomplished for us at the cross. "But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14).

In a second aspect, we need to live in this victory daily: “And who is the one who overcomes [present participle, meaning “is overcoming”] the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 Jn. 5:5) This overcoming one is further defined in context by the previous verse, which states that “whatever is born of God overcomes [present tense] the world” (v. 4). What has been born of God is our human spirit, where the new birth takes place (Jn. 3:6; Heb. 12:9). We must live in our regenerated spirit by faith, where the living Christ dwells, in order to overcome all of the allurements and entrapments of this world that would keep us from fully loving the Father and doing His will.

Here are some considerations for a daily victory over the world. Most importantly, we must recognize that this matter is a serious issue for believers. We must be alert to the subtlety of the world and its pull on our lives. We must agree with God that we are “strangers and exiles on the earth” (Heb. 11:13), and that included in our identification with Christ in His death is our crucifixion to the world (Gal. 6:14). I often make this agreement with God in my time of morning meditation by confessing Galatians 6:14 to God. In such an agreement, we not only confirm the spiritual reality of our crucifixion to the world, but we also should open ourselves to God so that any entanglement or love of the world may be put to death.

Surely, we should not be entangled in the world system, or be usurped by it. Yet, we should not try to leave the system by withdrawing from it physically. The New Testament never calls us to live apart from society. Jesus prayed to the Father: “I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (Jn. 17:15-16). This means that we should live within the world system, but not be “of the world.” In experience this means that our heart will not love this system, and we will not follow its cues to find fulfillment. Rather, our heart is ever seeking to live unto God in the midst of our daily activities.

As a result, our lifestyle will appear different to others. We should not have the same appetite as the worldly people do for riches, fame, possessions and entertainment. Our choices here will not be a matter of “rules” for us. They will be a matter of heart desire and sensitivity to the working of the Holy Spirit. As we are also sensitive to the ways of man in the church, our spirit will often direct us to follow a different path than that of other believers.

It is important to note that the word of God plays an especially important role in sanctifying us from the world (Jn. 17:15-19). If we are truly seeking the Lord and practicing the things covered in earlier lessons, this matter of being triumphant over the world’s pull should be our experience.

LESSON 23

Challenges to the Overcomer (continued)

We will now continue with some other challenges to the victorious Christian, as seen in the word of God.

Overcoming sin and spiritual deadness

The overcomer must overcome indwelling sin and spiritual deadness (Rom. 6:12; 8:2). Although the Bible does not use the word “overcome” specifically in connection with sin, this victory is implied by the verses just noted. We are all aware of the most basic problem we struggle with – the problem of sin.

The Bible also teaches us that sin leads to death (Rom. 5:12). Sin in our lives can lead to physical death, but there can also be a sense of spiritual deadness, or death, in our experience. This comes when we have our mind set on the flesh and the things of the flesh (Rom. 8:6). We must be in touch with the living God in our spirit in order to experience righteousness and life (Rom. 8:4-6). With spiritual deadness we may sense our fellowship with God is not alive and fresh. When we sense this deadness within, we should turn to our living spirit to contact God and His life. Any sin should be repented of and confessed.

Overcoming evil with good

The overcomer must overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21). Sometimes evil persons may come against us. Perhaps these will even be the members of our own family. We must overcome such evil with good. We should never return evil for evil (Rom. 12:17). In order not to be defeated by evil, we must do good to such evil persons. “But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:20-21). See also Luke 6:27-36.

Overcoming the devil

The overcomer must overcome God’s enemy, Satan. The apostle John wrote, “I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one” (1 Jn. 2:13b). Then, he writes an expanded version of this statement in the next verse: “I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one” (1 Jn. 2:14b). The description “young men” is a word picture for the believer who has achieved some measure of maturity. The strength of these believers is connected to the word of God being active and alive within them. This gives us insight into victory over the devil. With the word of God being our source of spiritual strength and supply, we can stand in faith against the subtle attacks of the devil.

The word of God counters the lies and deceit of the devil. He is the father of lies (Jn. 8:44). The devil may try to tell us that we can’t have victory, or that God won’t hear us, or that we have committed the unpardonable sin. He may send a thought into our mind to cause us to have doubt, tempt us to sin, or attract us to the world. Yet, every lie, every temptation, and every deceit can be countered by the truth of God, plus our willingness to obey God. This is the way Jesus met the temptations of the devil in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11).

In Revelation, John recorded how the saints overcome the enemy: “And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death” (Rev. 12:11). Firstly, the blood is needed to defeat the devil’s accusations against us. The Greek word for devil is *diabolos* (Strong’s #1228). This word means an accuser, or a slanderer. The devil is an accuser who will remind us of our sinfulness and failures (Rev. 12:10). We can answer all of his accusations by the cleansing blood of Christ that secures our righteousness before God (Rom. 3:25; 1 Jn. 1:9).

The second item mentioned in Rev. 12:11 for defeating the devil is “the word of their testimony.” In the context of Rev. 12, a time of persecution, this testimony means a holding fast to the confession of Christ as Lord and to the truth of God’s word at a time when the devil attempts to deceive the whole world (Rev. 12:9). In principle, in our daily lives now, this testimony could include our speaking of the truth of God to counter the lies and deceit and accusations of the devil. For instance, when a thought enters our mind that we are weak and will fail, we must say, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). When the devil tries to condemn us by reminding us of our old sinful nature, we must speak the word: “Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor. 5:17). “Thank you, Lord, that I am in Christ. I am a new creation and the old things of my old life have passed away. My old life was crucified with you, Lord, at the cross. Now Christ is my life.”

We may even speak to the devil: “Devil, my old man was crucified with Christ. I am a new creation. Who is he who condemns? God is the one who justifies [see Rom. 8:33-34].” The devil attacks us in our thought life. We must fight against him by “destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God . . . taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” (2 Cor. 10:5) We must tear down the lies that are against God’s revealed truth and stand firm in our faith, maintaining the word of our testimony.

The devil particularly likes to attack us with anxiety concerning our situation. We need to cast all of our anxiety upon our caring Father, trusting in His care, and firmly resist the devil by our faith in God and His truth.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all of your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you. Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. (1 Pet. 5:6-9)

The third secret in Rev. 12:11 for overcoming the enemy is to not love our lives even unto death. This means that we are willing to give up everything for Christ, even our lives. This kind of willingness to follow Christ at any cost leaves Satan no ground for successful temptation and defeat of us. Rather, he is defeated and we are victorious over him!

The Lord Jesus Christ fully defeated Satan at the cross and in resurrection (Jn. 12:31; Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14-15). We share in this victory in Christ (1 Cor. 15:57; Eph. 1:19-22). Our need is not to try to defeat the devil by any of our efforts, but to stand firmly in faith in all that Christ has accomplished for us. “Take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm” (Eph. 6:13). Satan will assault us in our thought life with all kinds of doubts, discouragement, temptations and evil thoughts. But, we must take up “the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (Eph. 6:16). Standing firm in faith in our position of victory in Christ, while being fully yielded to Him, Satan will have no ground to defeat us.

It is possible that a Christian may come under particularly strong attack or oppression by evil spirits. This can occur if we have given place to the devil through some disobedience (Eph. 4:27), if we have dabbled in the occult, or perhaps for other reasons. In such cases, a more concerted warfare against the foothold of the enemy is required. For help with this problem, I recommend the book entitled, “*The Adversary*” by Mark Bubeck (published by Moody Press).

Overcoming false teachers and prophets

The overcomer must overcome false teachers and prophets. “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world” (1 Jn. 4:4). The “them” in this verse refers back to the false prophets mentioned in verse one. This passage speaks of false

prophets who teach a particular falsehood about Christ's person, and thus deny a basic tenet of the faith. Yet, I believe in principle this particular arena of overcoming extends to all false prophets and teachers.

Peter warned of false teachers that would come among the believers and lead them astray (2 Pet. 2:1). Unless a believer is victorious over the deceit of these teachers and their teaching, the believer will be misled in his or her walk of faith. For instance, the false teachers in 2 Peter 2 entice immature believers by appealing to their fleshly desires (2 Pet. 2:18). Unless the believers can escape the snare of such devilish teaching, they will end up trying to use their faith to satisfy their fleshly appetites. We see this happening today.

Many believers over the years have been caught in movements or assemblies that contain false teachers who were never commissioned by God. These deceived followers do not mature in the Lord and are sometimes terribly wounded by their experience. How important it is for Christians to overcome false teachers and escape from their influence!

Overcoming negative circumstances

The overcomer must overcome negative circumstances. Note the following passage from Romans that mentions this aspect of overcoming.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword? Just as it is written, "For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. (Rom. 8:35-37)

In this passage the term "overwhelmingly conquer" is a translation of one Greek verb, *hupernikeo* (Strong's #5245). This verb is a compound word composed of two words, namely *huper*, meaning more, and *nikao*, meaning to conquer. This passage shows us that even in severe circumstances we can overcome. What do we overcome? We overcome the natural effect of those circumstances, which try to depress us and try to extinguish our testimony for Christ.

The testing of such "fiery trial(s)" (1 Pet. 4:12) seems so frightening to the human mind. Further, the idea that one could overcome the negative impact of such severe trials, and maintain sanity and hope and peace while enduring them, seems so impossible to the natural mind. Yet, history testifies of the many Christian martyrs who went peacefully to their death with the Savior's praises on their lips. Others, less well known, have endured great hardships and difficulties in their Christian lives, yet have maintained a steadfast trust in the Lord and have kept their peace and joy through it all.

Such steadfastness does not mean that there will be no feelings of anxiety, perplexity or dejection at all. It means that such feelings will not have a lasting effect upon us, or cause us to stop pursuing Christ and following Him (2 Cor. 4:7-9).

The overcomer will continue to seek Christ in every negative situation, and will not succumb to the pressures of the trial. He will find Christ as his strength to endure. He will discover Christ as his source of deep joy and peace in spite of the outward afflictions. This type of overcoming proves that the power of victory is not of us, but of God. Read about some of these overcomers in Hebrews 11:35-39.

Overcoming degradation in the church

The overcomer must overcome all of the degraded situations that may exist in his local assembly. This aspect of overcoming is in line with the removal of the leaven from a mixed religious situation, which we discussed in the last lesson. Perhaps you had never considered this aspect of Christian overcoming, but it is very prominent in the word of God. In His letters to the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2 and 3), the Lord Jesus spoke of many defects among most of those assemblies. Then, He called for any who would hear to "overcome" all of the shortcomings.

Those seven churches were actual assemblies, but sound Bible teachers agree that the warnings to those assemblies would be applicable to any assembly in the church age. In fact, the Lord stated that what He spoke was not only to an individual church, but indeed to "the churches" (Rev. 2:7, etc.).

With His keen judging eyes (Rev. 1:14), the Lord Jesus saw a number of things among the churches that He condemned, and which required overcoming. Some of these things included the loss of one's first love (for the Lord and for fellow believers), wrong practices, wrong teachings, idolatry (spiritual, and perhaps literal), spiritual deadness, lukewarmness and spiritual pride. Also, the matter of overcoming was linked to faithfulness in practices which the Lord approved (Rev. 3:10), and to the saints' willingness to endure suffering for the Lord, even unto death (Rev. 2:10).

Brothers and sisters, we should not tolerate what the Lord condemns. Today, most Christians are just flowing along with the tide of the leavened mixture in Christianity. No one likes to be misunderstood, or even rejected, for not going along with the crowd. Yet, the momentous Judgment Seat of Christ is coming, and we will all be called to account individually for our actions.

In light of this coming judgment upon the lives we have lived (2 Cor. 5:10), we must be willing to deny the self and abandon all of the things in the church that are simply not of God. If we do not do this, we will lose our reward, or perhaps even be chastened, in the day of judgment. Read again the messages from the Lord to the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2 and 3). There are wonderful promises to the overcomers, and warnings of discipline for those who will not hear. Much of this admonition will find fulfillment at the Lord's return. The Lord is issuing a call to all who would hear that they must overcome the degraded mixture in Christendom.

The Lord will grant us much grace if we seek Him to overcome in the areas discussed in this lesson.

LESSON 24

Victorious in Works

“He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS.” (Rev. 2:26)

So far, this series has not specifically addressed the matter of the believer’s good works, except in general terms about following the Lord. Generally speaking, we Christians think of our good works as our ministry to others, including the exercise of our spiritual gifts. We now pay attention to how the believer can be victorious in this aspect of the Christian walk.

Jesus is our pattern

We should realize that Jesus, as a genuine man dependent upon the Father, provides us with insights on how to carry out good works. Here are some verses worthy of examination:

“Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show Him, that you may marvel.’” (Jn. 5:19-20)

In the passage above we see that Jesus simply did those works which He “saw” the Father doing. The Father was working in Jesus to reveal to Him what the Father was doing, and Jesus simply followed the Father’s revelation and joined Him in carrying out those works.

“But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do – testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me.” (Jn. 5:36)

Here we see that the Father had specific works which He gave to Jesus to accomplish.

“Jesus answered them, ‘I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?’” (Jn. 10:32)

In this verse we see that the works that Jesus did are “from the Father.” That is, the Father was the source of the works. Jesus did not derive His works from His own creativity or initiative; rather, He declared that the Father was the source of His works of ministry.

“If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me.” (Jn. 10:37)

Again, Jesus claimed that the works which He performed were not from Himself, but were of His Father.

On the night before going to the cross, Jesus prayed a marvelous prayer, as recorded in John 17. Significantly, He made the following declaration to His Father in that prayer:

“I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do.” (Jn. 17:4)

Once again we see that Jesus was not the originator of what He did on the earth. Rather, He carried out the work which God the Father specifically gave Him to do.

With this vivid picture in mind of how Jesus simply followed the Father’s lead in doing good works, let us now look at passages that show such a pattern is to be replicated in the lives of His followers.

Co-workers with God

The Scripture does encourage us to do good works. For example, woman should adorn themselves with good works, according to First Timothy (1 Tim. 2:10). Titus declares that Christ Jesus “gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Tit. 2:14). In Hebrews, we are told that we should “consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24). Thus, we see that God wants us to do good deeds. However, He does not want us to do things apart from Him, apart from the working of His life. This is the lesson that we learn from the pattern of Jesus doing the works of the Father.

It is actually freeing that we do not have to dream up and initiate good works “for God” by means of our own ingenuity and labor. Instead, as we seek Him and are in fellowship with Him, we will realize what works God has set before us into which we should enter. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for **good works, which God prepared beforehand**, that we **should walk in them**” (Eph. 2:10). This verse is a marvelous verse. It sets our mind at ease about coming up with something to do for Him. This is a verse we all should memorize and pray over. I like to tell the Lord that I just want to walk in those good works which He has prepared for me. I don’t care about doing any other works.

There is another verse we should look at on this point. “So, then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (Gal. 6:10). At first glance one may think that this verse simply encourages us to do good works whenever and wherever, without any need for God’s hand of arrangement in the activity. Yet, this is not the case. This verse is actually a sister verse to Eph. 2:10, which tells us that God has prepared certain works beforehand so that we might walk in them. The key to insight into this verse is seen in the word “opportunity.” There is no true English equivalent to the Greek word *kairos*, translated here as “opportunity.” The word as used in Gal. 6:10 means a certain period of time which presents a specific opportunity. Even in ordinary life we sometimes realize that we missed an “opportunity” to do something. When we realize this, we know it is too late to do what was possible because the specific opportunity, the right time with the right conditions, is gone forever. We should realize that God is opening up specific opportunities for us to serve others by His sovereign arrangement. When we recognize such an opportunity, it is then that we should do the good deed towards another that is set before us. To help us seize these opportunities, we should be developing an attitude before God to be a “servant of all.”

Not only has God prepared the works ahead of time for us, but He also will give us the thoughts and the desires to do certain works, which are according to His will. “For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). “But thanks be to God who puts the same earnestness on your behalf in the heart of Titus. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest, he has gone to you of his own accord” (2 Cor. 8:16-17).

Additionally, God provides the power for us to do the spiritual work He has assigned to us. Paul, who labored greatly for the Lord, stated: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and **His grace toward me** did not prove vain; but **I labored** even more than all of them, **yet not I, but the grace of God with me**” (1 Cor. 15:10). Similarly, he told the church in Colossae: “And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to **His power** [literally, “working”], which mightily **works within me**” (Col. 1:29).

Our part is to seek the Lord with an overcomer’s heart and practices as presented in the earlier lessons. As we do this, God then works in us His desire to do certain works (1 Chron. 17:2; Neh. 2:12; 2 Cor. 8:16-17; Phil. 2:13). We then simply follow Him in obedience to carry out the deeds He has given to us to do. In this way, we are co-workers with God! Paul spoke of his ministry, which he and his fellow laborers had to the church in Corinth, as a “working together with God.” “And **working together with Him**, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” (2 Cor. 6:1)

In my experience, God will often initiate a work with just an idea, or subtle prompting. If the task is somewhat complex and will take place over a period of time, God will not usually provide details about the carrying out of the work. That usually unfolds in time as we seek Him in prayer about moving forward with

each phase of the assignment. If we agree to take up the task, however, God will be faithful to bring each detail into view as we need to know it. This is the way of faith and dependence. It is also a way of simplicity. Abraham knew that he was called out of the Ur of the Chaldeans, but he did not know exactly where he was going. He responded in faith by leaving that land and God led him one step at a time.

Also, we should realize that working together with God does not necessarily mean that we will have detailed knowledge of every minute action we are to take. For example, when God called Paul to preach the gospel in Macedonia, God did not direct Paul like a robot to certain individuals, telling him to go to this person, but not to that person. Rather, Paul went out preaching at every opportunity in the field to which God called him. He did not know in advance who might respond (Jn. 3:8). When he preached to a group of women at a place of prayer, God sovereignly opened the heart of one listener named Lydia (Acts 16:13,14). There may be some occasions, however, when we are in close fellowship with God, that His Spirit may direct us to a particular stranger for some type of ministry.

Often, our field of service is among the very saints with whom we have fellowship. As we seek to live in union with Christ, He will give us a desire to pray or care for others around us in a particular way. We then carry out that service in dependence upon the Lord. Outwardly, our actions of service may seem very natural and normal. However, behind the scenes in the spiritual realm, we are moving in concert with the desires and promptings of the Holy Spirit.

In his helpful book, *Secrets of the Vine*, Bruce Wilkinson reminds us that **fruitfulness** for the Lord does not come from making a grand plan for ministry, or by more activity. **Rather, it issues from abiding in the Lord. As Wilkinson puts it, God is not calling us to do more for Him, but to be more with Him.** As we truly abide in a living fellowship with Him, the fruit will come forth naturally. "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me" (Jn. 15:4). This lesson series on the Victorious Christian Life is designed to help you learn how to abide in Him.

Since we need to simply abide in Christ in order to produce good works, it would seem that this statement is all that needs to be said about such works. However, in the Bible, God gives us some cautions and some encouragement about good works beyond this simple plan. The Lord knows that we need these words in order to be sure that we are on the mark in our service to Him. Some of God's important reminders about our service are covered below.

The purity and the testing of our works

If our works truly come out of our abiding in Him, then these works will be approved by God and we will be rewarded for them in the Day of Judgment. The problem today is that there are many who are "doing things for the Lord," but seemingly not in union with Him. It is possible to be very busy for the Lord, but not abiding in Him. Thus, it will help us to be reminded about the need for purity in our works, and the fact that our works will be tested by God.

There were many problems in the church in Corinth. The one I wish to focus on now concerns the fleshly way in which the believers there were "building" the church. Paul told them plainly that what they were doing in their way of building was fleshly, that is, something according to the flesh, the old nature (1 Cor. 3:1-4). He then proceeded to warn them about the coming judgment upon the believer's works:

Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss, but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Cor. 3:11-15)

This word warns us that we must be careful how we build, how we work for the Lord. This word of caution provides a check for us to make sure what we do is really coming out of Him. The gold, silver and

precious stones can pass through the fire. Thus, these signify works that have God as their source and nature. The elements of wood, hay and straw are consumed by this coming judgment of God. Thus, these signify works that come out of the flesh, the natural man.

The natural man can be very strong and zealous to achieve something, even something “for God.” The “push” in Christendom today for works, without a strong, balancing word urging us to be sure that they are from God, is a danger. Today, there are multiplied ministries with all types of schemes, action plans, and busy conferences aimed at achieving something for God's kingdom. How much it is out of the energy and resources of the flesh?

All of our work needs to be under the cross, where we agree with God that we care for nothing done out of ourselves as the source, but only for what God has planned and is doing. **Only when we are willing to die to all that we are and what we can do, is God able to effectively do His work through us. He does not need talented men and women. He needs men and women willing to die to self, so that He might be everything.** All self-effort, all human ingenuity, all self-promotion, all self-interest, all self-power must go to the cross of Christ, that God may be realized. We take this position by faith, with a pure heart before the Lord. We serve in utter dependence upon Him. We do not await, however, any “feeling” of holiness, or special spirituality, before we are willing to move forward in serving God by faith. Thus, we are not passive. We are active in seeking Him, and willing to follow Him by faith, yet it is with the self on the cross and Christ living within us.

One passage that has made a great impression upon me is in the epistle to the Philippians:

But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. **For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus.** (Phil. 2:19-21)

What are our reasons for serving the Lord? Do they include self-interests, like recognition by others, popularity, financial gain, or our own ministry empire?

What are our ways of serving the Lord? Do we employ psychology, entertainment to delight the flesh of our audience, messages geared to “tickle the ears” (2 Tim. 4:3), accomplished oratory and persuasive words of wisdom (1 Cor. 2:1-5), mass marketing schemes, etc.? Do we serve in “newness of the spirit” (in union with the living Christ who dwells in our spirit), or do we just plod along in the oldness of the letter of the Law (Rom. 7:6), carrying out “commands” for the Lord?

As we seek to serve the Lord, let us always be cognizant of the fact that the Judgment Seat of Christ is coming and Christ will test our works by fire.

“I have a stewardship entrusted to me.” (1 Cor. 9:17b)

The greatest example of a servant of Christ was the apostle Paul. He was constantly cognizant of the stewardship that God had given to him (1 Cor. 4:1, 9:17; Gal. 2:7; Eph. 3:2; Col. 1:25). He knew that **as a steward** of the things of God **he must be faithful:**

“Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.” (1 Cor. 4:1-2)

Many believers do not have a vision of their stewardship, and many are not faithful. This is where we need a word of reminder.

Every Christian is a servant of Christ entrusted with a stewardship. Jesus made this abundantly clear in His parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), and His parable of the minas (Lk. 19:12-27), as well as in a number of other places. However, it is so easy for us to forget this responsibility. Part of the problem is the artificial clergy-laity system. This unscriptural system tends to make the “laity” think of the “clergy” as

the only ones who really have the stewardship and responsibility to labor with God. (For more information of the unbiblical nature of this damaging system, see the author's booklet entitled, *Governing Principles for Building Up the Body of Christ.*)

Yet, the fact remains that each of us, according to the parables noted above, has a stewardship. Also, the New Testament clearly shows that each of us has been gifted by God in order to serve:

"And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly." (Rom. 12:6)

"As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." (1 Pet. 4:10)

Besides the problem of the clergy-laity system in holding back our service, the Lord tells us in the parable in Matthew 25:14-30 that the saints who had fewer gifts were not faithful because they feared the Lord's expectation of them, and because they were lazy (vs. 24-26). A similar explanation is given in the other parable, where the worthless slave did nothing (Lk. 19:20-23). In the parable of Luke 19, all the slaves received the same portion, signifying the same salvation and new life in Christ. The difference in their productivity depended upon their relative faithfulness to labor for the Lord in faith.

There can be a tendency among us to want to enjoy the Lord's presence and blessings, but to avoid the exercise of faith and labor required to be a faithful steward. To serve the Lord calls for self-denial (of the way we want to use our time and money, our desire to be accepted by others, etc.). It also calls for an exercise of faith, wherein we seek the Lord in moving ahead in our service in trustful dependence upon Him. Romans 12:3-6 shows that God allots a measure of faith to each, as each one exercises his gift. Paul spoke of "the work of faith" which the Thessalonian believers carried out (1 Thess. 1:3).

To be sure that we are faithful in being co-workers together with God we need to have a willing heart to labor in faith, according to the gift God has given us. We must put away any thought that only certain persons ("clergy") can do real spiritual work for God. Also, we must not despise the size or nature of our spiritual gift, but be willing to labor with what God has given to us. With such preparation, we can more perfectly fulfill our responsibility of stewardship.

"And let us not lose heart in doing good" (Gal. 6:9)

There is another hindrance to our being victorious in good works, and that is the matter of discouragement. We are particularly prone to being discouraged when we do not seem to see the results of our labor.

Recently, I read the story of a "New Tribes" (a mission group) missionary couple. The wife related how they had been on the mission field for about fifteen years. Finally, in utter discouragement, she exclaimed to her husband that she was ready to give up because they had labored so long and seen no conversions. Her husband gently reminded her that they had been called to be faithful, even if results were not seen in their lifetime. This story reminds us that we should not base our continued labor for the Lord on visible results, but upon our stewardship, which calls for faithfulness (1 Cor. 4:2). By the way, the missionary story went on to say that within a few months after that talk some conversions occurred and the work started to blossom.

In the exercise of our spiritual gifts, it is not unusual for reaping to happen a good while after our sowing begins. Note the following verses:

"And do not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary." (Gal. 6:9)

"Therefore, since we have this ministry, as received mercy, we do not lose heart." (2 Cor. 4:1)

“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” (1 Cor. 15:58)

“Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains” (Jas. 5:7). (Although this verse speaks about waiting for the Lord’s return, it shows the principle of the farmer, who must wait patiently for the harvest after his sowing.)

Conclusion

We should be encouraged that to be victorious in good works is something that God desires for us and has even planned for us. He plans the works for us ahead of time, and supplies us with the spiritual gifts and power to carry them out. We need to focus on abiding in Him in order to be victorious in good works. At the same time, the Bible provides some helpful reminders to us: (1) Be careful about works produced for God from the flesh; (2) Be faithful in our stewardship by not despising our gift, or being idle or lazy; (3) Do not lose heart, but keep laboring for the Lord, knowing that our work in Him is not in vain, but will produce fruit in due season.

CONCLUSION

We have covered a good deal on the overcoming Christian life. It may seem a little overwhelming to some readers. However, if we take all of what we have said down to a daily level, it is really not overwhelming. It can be lived out. And, please understand that what we have covered is for the experience of a normal believer, not specifically for a full time Christian worker engaged in special service.

Let's take a normal day in the life of an overcoming believer. Soon after arising, perhaps before getting out of bed, such a one is already turning his heart to the Lord, praying to Him and beginning fellowship. The seeking believer is going to arise early enough to get some dedicated time in God's word and His presence before beginning the chores of the day. Soon, therefore, he or she will be finding a comfortable place to have that important feeding and fellowship time with the Lord.

Then, as he begins to go about the business of the day, the believer will inwardly be seeking after the Lord. Maybe prayers will be offered for some people that are on his heart as the believer drives to work, or as the housewife washes the dishes or rests in a chair for a few minutes. Perhaps the believer will be singing praise along with a song on the radio, or by means of a hymn that has come to mind. From time to time throughout the day, Scriptures may be meditated on inwardly as one is working. Scripture memory may also occur at some time.

As temptations arise, the victorious Christian will take his stand on the truth of God concerning his position in Christ. He is also watching and praying by inwardly looking away to the Lord, even while engaged in outward activity. In such a way, he is led by the Spirit to stay away from worldly activity and gossip. He is keeping his heart pure for the Lord by being willing to put to death worldly and fleshly desires. His separation from worldly activity is not by means of keeping certain rules, but by his inward sense of what is pleasing to God. He or she will sense liberty to do certain things, but some restraint concerning other things.

The overcomer is constantly seeking his union with Christ in inward fellowship. He is open to Christ for His leading and for service. In this way, if an opportunity arises to speak a word of witness, or to serve someone, he is ready to follow Christ. The overcomer's conscience is keenly alive by such fellowship to potential pitfalls, or to the need for confession if there is a failure. The believer is also willing to suffer according to God's will as different situations arise, or, as is often the case, never seem to go away. A difficult family member, a physical problem, opposition from others to our faith, the burdens of work, the constant pressure of finances, etc., all present opportunities to come daily to the throne of grace to be supplied with strength to endure the situation and to grow and learn in Christ.

The seeking overcomer is also careful to preserve some other time during the day when he can again have a definite time of fellowship with the Lord, perhaps for daily Bible reading or study, and perhaps for prayer and praise. This could even be with other members of his family. A family devotional time could be part of his routine spiritual activity. He is also often desirous of reading or listening to good ministry by others on a regular basis. This can easily be done by radio, or by other electronic means, while driving or while working around the house.

According to the desires and burdens that he or she receives while in fellowship with His Lord, this believer is also moving toward giving priority to serving in the body of Christ, or in gospel witness to unbelievers. All of us can serve one another practically and by prayer. Often, God will touch us about helping the needy or otherwise using our finances for His kingdom. In addition, the Christian will desire to serve according to his or her spiritual gifts. For example, one who has the gift of mercy may feel burdened to call or visit a saint who has had struggles. One with the gift of helps may seek ways to practically serve a family that has a need. As the believer senses this desire, he will make it a priority in his schedule to perform whatever service God has assigned to him. The overcoming believer is also

longing after true spiritual fellowship with other believers. He will desire to meet with others in small gatherings of "two or three" (Matt. 18:20) and in the local assembly of believers whenever possible.

Aside from the daily life pictured above, the seeking believer is, over the long run, growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. To do this, he is genuinely seeking to follow God fully. He is willing to deny himself. This means that he is willing to let go of things and activities that naturally make him happy in order to choose the will of God. Additionally, he is truly seeking to know God's will in the way of spiritual wisdom and understanding (Col. 1:9-10). He is always open to learn something new, and never feels that he has a complete knowledge of God and His word. To learn God's will, he is searching the Scriptures on matters of interest to him. He wants to hear directly from the Lord. He is also willing to forsake tradition, and the ways and systems of man, in order to follow God's word and God's will exclusively.

The overcoming believer is ever seeking to be more perfectly in line with God's purposes on the earth. He has an ear to hear what the Spirit is speaking, and he wants to be a follower of the Lamb, wherever He goes (Rev. 14:4). He may take a lonely path which other believers will not follow, but he will never abandon his openness to all believers, or a sense and practice of oneness with all believers (Eph. 4:1-3).

God has always had a remnant who were seeking to follow Him and His purpose on the earth. This was true in the Old Testament, for example, with the small remnant of Jews who, after being in captivity for 70 years, were willing to leave all and return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the temple. It is also true today. Some groups may try to identify their group as "the remnant", but the fact is that the real remnant is surely the overcomers, as we have described them, whoever and wherever they are. They are no doubt scattered here and there among many groups.

God is also a seeking God. He is seeking those who would respond to the call to be an overcomer with Him (Rev. 3:20-22). May you and I seek His grace to fully respond.

APPENDIX A

“Soul Nourishment First”

By George Müller

May 9, 1841

It has pleased the Lord to teach me a truth, the benefit of which I have not lost, for more than fourteen years. The point is this:

I saw more clearly than ever that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not how much I might serve the Lord, or how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished. For I might seek to set the truth before the unconverted, I might seek to benefit believers, I might seek to relieve the distressed, I might in other ways seek to behave myself as it becomes a child of God in this world; and yet, not being happy in the Lord, and not being nourished and strengthened in my inner man day by day, all this might not be attended to in a right spirit.

Before this time my practice had been, at least for ten years previously, as an habitual thing, to give myself to prayer, after having dressed myself in the morning. Now, I saw that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the Word of God, and to meditation on it, that thus my heart might be comforted, encouraged, warned, reprov'd, instructed; and that thus, by means of the Word of God, while meditating on it, my heart might be brought into experiential communion with the Lord.

I began therefore to meditate on the New Testament from the beginning, early in the morning. The first thing I did, after having asked in a few words the Lord's blessing upon his precious Word, was, to begin to meditate on the Word of God, searching as it were into every verse, to get blessing out of it; not for the sake of the public ministry of the Word, not for the sake of preaching on what I had meditated upon, but for the sake of obtaining food for my own soul.

The result I have found to be almost invariably this, that after a very few minutes my soul has been led to confession, or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication; so that, though I did not, as it were, give myself to prayer, but to meditation, yet it turned almost immediately more or less into prayer. When thus I have been for a while making confession or intercession, or supplication, or have given thanks, I go to the next words or verse, turning all, as I go on, into prayer for myself or others, as the Word may lead to it, but still continually keeping before me that food for my own soul is the object of my meditation. The result of this is, that there is always a good deal of confession, thanksgiving, supplication, or intercession mingled with my meditation, and then my inner man almost invariably is even sensibly nourished and strengthened, and that by breakfast time, with rare exceptions, I am in a peaceful if not happy state of heart. Thus also the Lord is pleased to communicate unto me that which, either very soon after or at a later time, I have found to become food for other believers, though it was not for the sake of the public ministry of the Word that I gave myself to meditation, but for the profit of my own inner man.

The difference, then, between my former practice and my present one is this:

Formerly, when I rose, I began to pray as soon as possible, and generally spent all my time till breakfast in prayer, or almost all the time. At all events I almost invariably began with prayer, except when I felt my soul to be more than usually barren, in which case I read the Word of God for food, or for refreshment, or for a revival and renewal of my inner man, before I gave myself to prayer.

But what was the result? I often spent a quarter of an hour, or half an hour, or even an hour, on my knees, before being conscious to myself of having derived comfort, encouragement, humbling of soul, etc., and often, after having suffered much from wandering of mind for the first ten minutes, or a quarter of an hour, or even half an hour, I only then began really to pray. I scarcely ever suffer now in this way. For my heart, first being nourished by the truth, being brought into experiential fellowship with God, I then speak to my Father and to my Friend, (vile though I am, and unworthy of it), about the things that He has brought before me in His precious Word.

It often now astonishes me that I did not sooner see this point. In no book did I ever read about it. No public ministry ever brought the matter before me. No private intercourse with a brother stirred me up to this matter. And yet, now, since God has taught me this point, it is as plain to me as anything, that the first thing the child of God has to do morning by morning is, to obtain food for his inner man. As the outward man is not fit for work for any length of time except we take food, and as this is one of the first things we do in the morning, so it should be with the inner man. We should take food for that, as every one must allow.

Now, what is the food for the inner man? Not prayer, but the Word of God; and here again, not the simple reading of the Word of God, so that it only passes through our minds, just as water runs through a pipe, but considering what we read, pondering over it, and applying it to our hearts. When we pray, we speak to God. Now, prayer, in order to be continued for any length of time in any other than a formal manner, requires, generally speaking, a measure of strength or godly desire, and the season, therefore, when this exercise of the soul can be most effectually performed is after the inner man has been nourished by meditation on the Word of God, where we find our Father speaking to us, to encourage us, to comfort us, to instruct us, to humble us, to reprove us. We may therefore profitably meditate, with God's blessing, though we are ever so weak spiritually; nay, the weaker we are, the more we need meditation for the strengthening of our inner man.

Thus there is far less to be feared from wandering of mind than if we give ourselves to prayer without having had time previously for meditation. I dwell so particularly on this point because of the immense spiritual profit and refreshment I am conscious of having derived from it myself, and I affectionately and solemnly beseech all my fellow believers to ponder this matter. By the blessing of God, I ascribe to this mode the help and strength which I have had from God to pass in peace through deeper trials, in various ways, than I had ever had before; and after having now above fourteen years tried this way, I can most fully, in the fear of God, commend it.

In addition to this I generally read, after family prayer, larger portions of the Word of God, when I still pursue my practice of reading regularly onward in the Holy Scriptures, sometimes in the New Testament, and sometimes in the Old, and for more than twenty-six years I have proved the blessedness of it. I take, also, either then or at other parts of the day, time more especially for prayer. How different, when the soul is refreshed and made happy early in the morning, from what it is when without spiritual preparation, the service, the trials, and the temptations of the day come upon one.

About the Author

The author trusted in Christ in 1974 when he was a twenty-nine year old businessman. Shortly thereafter, he attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary for a period of time.

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