

Who Are the Overcomers in Revelation 2-3?

“To him who overcomes . . .” or “He who overcomes . . .” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21)

In the seven letters to the churches of Revelation chapters 2-3, the overcomers can be seen as either 1) all believers who are promised entrance into the kingdom, or 2) individual believers who overcome trials and are promised rewards in the kingdom and in eternity. The churches and their problems are obviously familiar and thus contemporary with the apostle John, the author, but the exhortations are relevant for all times.

Since all who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior overcome the world and Satan, all believers are guaranteed some form of future rule based on their position in Christ (Rom. 8:37; 1 Cor. 6:3; Rev. 1:6; 5:9-10; 20:4-6). However, the Scriptures seem to indicate that some believers will have special ruling privileges because of their performance or perseverance in faithfulness (Matt. 19:28; Mark 10:35-40; 2 Tim. 2:12). Both views have persuasive arguments.

The view that the overcomers are all believers:

- A primary argument for this view comes from 1 John 5:4-5: *“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that overcomes the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”* Here, the overcomer is anyone who believes in Jesus Christ as Savior, and through that faith, overcomes the world. This victory is positional, because in a practical sense, those who believe can shrink back in shame (1 John 2:28).
- Another argument is that since Jesus Christ overcame (Jn. 16:33; Rom. 8:37), all who are in Christ are overcomers.
- All who believe in Christ have a part in the first resurrection, even carnal believers, and these will reign with Christ (1 Cor. 15:20-23; Rev. 20:4-6).
- Some of the things promised to the overcomers in Revelation 2-3 are promised to all believers: They are not hurt by the second death (2:11; 21:6-8), will be given the morning star (2:28; 2 Peter 1:19), will not be blotted out of the book of life (3:5; 20:15), will sit with Christ on His throne (3:21; and will reign with Christ, 20:4-6).
- The promise to overcomers in Revelation 21:6-8 is to those who believe (who drink the water of life) and are contrasted with unbelievers who go into the lake of fire. This assumes that “inherit all things” refers to entrance into the kingdom.

Speaking in general, all Christians by virtue of their position in Christ, have overcome the world and the devil and will participate in some way in a future rule.

The view that the overcomers are faithful believers:

- The argument that the overcomers in Revelation 2-3 are believers who overcome their trials starts with the observation that Jesus is addressing seven churches. While there may be unbelievers in

Number 92

these churches, the designation *church* assumes a Christian identity and reputation. There are no invitations to believe in Christ for salvation. Nowhere is there evidence of a predominance of unbelievers in any of the churches addressed in these chapters or in the entire New Testament. Only faithful Christians in these churches are granted future privileges.

- In Revelation 2-3 conditions for overcoming are never stated as faith in Christ, but involve faithfulness, repentance, perseverance, and works. (2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). Works is mentioned twelve times (fourteen times in the Majority Text). Jesus says, “I know your deeds” five times. The emphasis is on works or deeds, not faith for eternal life. Doing works and persevering to the end is contrary to salvation by grace through faith (2:26).
- Just as John’s Gospel has a different purpose than First John, so First John has a different purpose than Revelation. Words must be understood considering each book’s purpose. The overcomer in 1 John 4:1 overcomes the spirit of the antichrists in the world, and in 5:4-5 describes the one who has initial faith in Christ as Savior and overcomes the world and Satan. The overcomers in Revelation 2-3 obtain their status by ongoing faith and perseverance in trials. The present active participle (“the one who conquers”) is used to show their present activity, not past faith in Christ.
- The promises in Revelation 2-3 are to individuals who overcome, not to the whole church.
- If all believers are overcomers, the commands to these churches (and all commands to believers) are empty and unnecessary because they are guaranteed victory.
- If all believers are overcomers there is no room for believers who fail or die in their sins (1 Cor. 11:30; 1 John 5:16). Victory in the Christian life is not guaranteed for all believers.
- To give rewards to everyone for a virtue that all have does not make sense.
- Jesus had to overcome to reign, which is not related to salvation (Rev. 3:21).
- Crowns (as future rewards), not eternal life, are given to the overcomers (2:10) and can possibly be lost (3:11).

In Revelation 2-3, overcomers seem to be individual believers in the church who are repentant, faithful, and persevering in the trials that face each church.

Conclusion

The identity of the overcomers in Revelation 2-3 is a difficult interpretational problem. Both major views have good arguments. However, we must be careful to interpret difficult passages in light of the context of the book and their use there. What is being overcome? The overcomers in First John are those who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior, and they therefore have overcome the world and Satan. The overcomers in Revelation are believers who have victory over trials by virtue of their faithfulness, repentance, and perseverance in good works. The latter interpretation of the overcomers in Revelation 2-3 would be most consistent with the gospel of free grace. While all believers will rule as overcomers in Christ, some will have special privileges because they overcame specific trials in faithfulness to Christ. All believers will participate in the future reign of Christ, but some will have more prominent positions and privileges. It will require a separate study to show how each of these special privileges for victorious Christians in Revelation 2-3 harmonize with other Scriptural statements.