

Overcomer Testimony

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Overcomer Testimony is a message from God concerning those who have overcome and are recognized by God as special, with promises and a special place in His heart.

Topics: "Overcoming Faith", "Corporate Testimony"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the concept of 'Overcomer Testimony' as a divine message for the Church, highlighting the historical presence of overcomers throughout Scripture, from Abel to the prophets and into the New Testament. He explains that overcomers are not defined by partial truths or doctrines but are individuals who have a personal relationship with God, embodying His full thoughts and intentions. Sparks stresses that true overcomers experience a vital union with Christ, which leads to spiritual growth and corporate testimony. He concludes that the essence of being an overcomer is rooted in a deep, personal history with God, resulting in a collective expression of His greatness through the Church.

Transcript

Reading: Isa. 1:9; Rom. 9:27,29; 11:2-5,26; Isa. 8:17,18.

After long and very deep exercise of heart and weighing things solemnly before the Lord, I am led quite strongly to the conclusion that His message for us at this time, and not for us only, but for His whole Church, is concerning Overcomer Testimony. The definition will wait upon all that we have to say; I do not stay to try to explain that in any preliminary word. You will notice that I leave out the article and just say "Overcomer Testimony", not something new in itself perhaps to any of us, but I believe in the intention of God, new in emphasis. We begin by reminding ourselves of the fact of overcomers throughout the whole history recorded in the Scriptures, the fact of Overcomers in Divine history.

The Fact of Overcomers

Overcomers date from the very first spiritual declension. Abel marked that development and was the first Overcomer, and Overcomers are found at every point of spiritual climax; when things had proceeded and their whole tendency or actual course was a departure from the essential mind of God. When that course reached a climax, at that point you find Overcomers. Enoch marked such a climactic point, and he not only historically signified something which stood against the general spiritual course, but was in himself prophetic of this whole course and consummation; prophetic that throughout history God would have that which was quite different from things in general spiritually, and a positive counter thereto. The little

reference to Enoch, as you know, comes right there in the midst of the monotonous recounting of men's deaths and burials. The whole course is just broken into, suddenly, strikingly, with the simple statement before the old course is resumed - "And Enoch walked with God; and he was not; for God took him" (Gen. 5:24). Then you revert to death and burial. Noah and his family were the embodiment of the principle of overcomers. Joseph again took up that principle, one of a whole patriarchal family. The spiritual level had become very low, a period of spiritual paralysis had been introduced and was about to run four hundred years. Right into that situation, Joseph stood as something different, distinguished. In himself and in his testimony and in his experience, he embodied very much of that which goes to make the Overcomer.

It is not our intention to stay with all those details. Every one of the Overcomer features in all these people would occupy an hour. That is not our business. Joshua and Caleb form a link in this chain when death is rampant, active, running its course to wipe out the whole generation of the Lord's people because of spiritual failure. Joshua and Caleb maintained God's original position and are maintained by God against the course of things, and are brought through into the full inheritance. Elijah undoubtedly occupied that position and fulfilled that capacity of the Overcomer in his day. Indeed, we may say of all or most of the prophets. Daniel stands out amongst them. The seven thousand who bowed not the knee to Baal were the Overcomers of their day, and the hundred prophets hidden by Obadiah in two companies of fifty. Ezra, Nehemiah and the Remnant - they stand in this succession, until we come to the end of the Old Testament to find what is almost like a Remnant of the remnant in Malachi when even the Remnant has declined. "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one with another" (Malachi 3:16 - Overcomers of the end.)

We move into the New Testament and are immediately in the presence of Overcomers - Anna and Simeon in themselves, and then they spoke to all those who looked for the Redemption of Jerusalem. But they were a distinguished people, they were waiting for the Lord. In the Gospels, this is exactly what is happening. The Lord Jesus made no national appeal, and certainly no political appeal. He gathered out a nucleus - if you like - as to things as they were then, a remnant, for those who came into living association with Him: the twelve, the one hundred and twenty were something different spiritually from the religious life, and the best religious life, of their day, and they proved to be Overcomers indeed.

Then we pass to the end of the New Testament, and we know that sevenfold repetition of the very phrase in the second and third chapters of the Revelation - "to him that overcometh". And what is represented by the seven seems to be gathered up into one in Chapter 12 and has now become a corporate expression or representation of Overcomers in a Man-child concerning whom it is said - "And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb, and because of the word of their testimony; and they loved not their life even unto death".

Very rapidly, that is a survey of the fact of Overcomers, and from that survey we are able to see that such are definitely recognised by God. They are taken account of by God Himself and to such He makes special promises. They are of account to Him in a special way. That is expressed in the words concerning the little company in Malachi's time - "And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in the day that I do make, even a peculiar treasure". Now, perhaps all that needed little emphasis and perhaps hardly needed to have been said. Nevertheless, we must have our foundation of Scripture for all that we have to say.

The Nature of Overcomers

1. Negatively

So we pass from the fact of the Overcomers to the nature and function of Overcomers, and firstly just a word negatively, what Overcomers are not. They do not stand related to anything partial. I do want you to take very careful note of this. It is most important that we are clear as to what it is we have in view. I repeat therefore that Overcomers do not stand related to anything partial. They are not the sponsors and champions of particular doctrines and interpretations, and such things. With them, it is not a matter of certain conceptions of truth and practices in relation thereto, although from time to time a specific emphasis has been necessary because at certain points particular weakness and failure has arisen. Nevertheless, in the thought of God it is the whole counsel of God which He was seeking to restore and not some part of it. Overcomers, if they are according to God's mind, are not people individually or collectively who simply underline certain truths and keep to that. Therefore they cannot be a separate and distinctive movement marked by just particular and specific teaching and separated from all others for that reason. They cannot be joined, you cannot join the Overcomer band. You cannot argue, discuss, reason out Overcomer truth and adopt it or reject it. You cannot have a Round Table for considering this thing, and then deciding what you are going to do with it. All such conceptions, mentalities and activities are ruled out. It cannot be taken up, for it is not an "it" as something apart from all God's thought. It is the very embodiment of all God's thought. We have heard a certain interpretation given to a fragment which is repeated in those early chapters of Revelation. "If any man", and "to him that overcometh" and the explanation, the interpretation, is that at the end things are no longer corporate but just individual, and the suggestion or implication of that interpretation is that all that is in Ephesians is cancelled out by Revelation, that all the teaching on the corporate nature and expression of the Body of Christ is now suspended and it has become resolved into a personal and individual matter. "If any man," and "to him". Dear friends, I have always found very great difficulty in believing that any one part of God's Word rules out another part, and especially such parts as Ephesians; and while, as you shall see in a moment, there is an element of truth in that interpretation, unless it is safeguarded, it is very dangerous and misleading. Anything that is misleading is very dangerous.

Rather should not the interpretation be this that while the corporate remains, we can only be in the corporate by a personal revelation. An Overcomer is one who has a personal history with God in these matters. What I have just been saying is that it is not a thing that you can take up, that you can have meetings about and you can discuss and argue and decide upon in a collective way, so that you get the resolution of the meeting as to what is going to happen and what course you are going to take. That is not so. It comes down to this - it is something between the individual and God. It is a very immediately personal thing of what God has been doing and is doing in the life, in the spirit, in the being of those concerned. Anything corporate must come out of that. Of course, that has always been the law of the Church. But here at the end in order to get back to a full and adequate corporate testimony, the individual has got to have a very living history with God as to what God is really after, has got to know that he or she, no matter what is happening to all the rest, he or she is under the hand of God and God is doing something. That is the bedrock of Overcomer testimony, and if what I have already said is not wrong, that Rev. 12 is the sum of Rev. 2 and 3 in its spiritual essence, the corporate is found in Rev. 12 in a Man-child. A Man-child is born which is spoken of firstly as a single entity and then referred to as "they". It is many in one; it is the corporate, but it is the sum total of all those individuals who have overcome, the "any man"s, the "to him"s now brought into a final collective expression. What I am trying to emphasize is this, that the essence of Overcomer testimony is that God has done something very definitely and very specifically, something much more than a general operation in the heart in relation to something which is very near to His own heart, and which the whole body even of Christians will not be prepared to accept and follow after. Well, that is the negative side - what it is not.

2. Positively

(a) Life and Spirituality

Let us come to the positive side. We begin from the circumference. God has His own very great thoughts and intentions as to His creation. Oh, I do pray God that I may not fail in this one thing that is in my heart, that Overcomer testimony is not some little thing, some little hole-in-the-corner thing, some little departmental thing - (I mean the testimony). People may be small, as we shall see later, but the Testimony is great. God has His own very great thoughts and intentions as to His creation. They are far, far too great for our comprehension at any one time. We can only grow unto them and into them. We have not the constitution to bear the full unveiling of the thoughts of God; we should just go to pieces, crack under the strain, we could not stand it. It is always true, - "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now" (John 16:12). Have you never, even in the poor, limited, fragmentary revelation that has come to you by some means had to say, Stop! I cannot go any, further, I have enough to occupy me for some time to come. Think of all the vast range and significance of Divine thoughts and intentions. At no one time can we comprehend them all. Moreover, it will take a vast multitude, a countless number, to grow into those thoughts. The most that anyone could ever comprehend will be a mere fragment, an atom. It will require that great multitude which no man can number to comprehend and express the thoughts and intentions of God.

And let us at once say that these thoughts of God are not just ideas and abstract mental effusions. They are all embodied and expressed in a living Person, His Son, God Himself incarnate. God's thoughts have been brought to us in that way. We must remember that, while the Lord Jesus had an individual consciousness, He also had a race consciousness. While He, in His own mind, was a Person, an individual Person, He was in Himself also a vast corporate company, He was the nucleus of a great multitude. That is why you can never come into the Lord Jesus and be an individual. If you are in Christ you are only a part of something very vast, and all these great, these vast thoughts and intentions of God are all centred in His Son, embodied in Him, and eventually, so great is He, so vast is He as the sum of all God's thoughts and intentions, that He will fill all things. That, of course, at once puts a great strain upon even our brains, and I hope it is not just going to be brain work. Vital union with Christ and vital union in Him is essential to the comprehending of these thoughts of God. The way of such knowledge is the way of life, and the way of life is positive corporate union with the Lord Jesus. The way of God's teaching is not the way of the classroom. The way of God's teaching is the way of practical handling of us and bringing about situations in which we have to know Christ in some new way, which knowledge alone can save us from despair, which knowledge alone can deliver us, which knowledge is absolutely vital and essential to our existence. It becomes a crisis like that, so that the true spiritual life is one of a series of crises which are ends and new beginnings; the end of something inadequate, the beginning of some new discovery of Christ, some new knowledge of Him. It is practical, vital knowledge, taught by and through experience. That is the way of comprehending God, His thoughts and intentions, and it is the only way. It is the only way to that position where there will be an issue in triumph.

The situation is sooner or later going to be one of defeat or victory, and utter defeat or utter victory. It is going to be right through and right out, or it is going to be the other way. That is the issue for the Overcomer, that is the issue for the Church, and it will only be those who, in this way of experience, under the hand of God, have come to know the Lord, to know Christ inwardly, who will go right through and right out. That is the revelation of the Overcomer, the Manchild, in Rev. 12. It is knowledge of Christ in life and growth, and that on the principle of the Body, organic and corporate, and again that by reason of deathless

life. Oh, listen! Deathless life in which there is no old age or senility. I say that because many of us are very conscious of the latter. We know that old age is creeping towards us and we are very much aware of senility overtaking, that is, growing limitations in mental powers, concentration and application and mental endurance and in other ways; which means that naturally we are not going to learn a great deal more in that way, we are not going to comprehend very much more. We are going to reach our limit and then perhaps decline naturally. But what I am saying now is this, that there is that in us which in extreme old age can still be comprehending the vast, and going far beyond the capacity of nature. Spiritual knowledge is so different, spiritual apprehension is so different from natural. The capacity of Divine life knows nothing of decay, of corruption, of limitation, of coming to an end or declining. It is possible and it ought to be the experience of every true child of God that even in old age they bear fruit; in this sense, that there is that which still is fresh and still in growth when natural powers are declining. Therefore I say this knowledge of Christ on the principle of life knows nothing of old age and senility; it goes on. Do not surrender to nature; that is, do not surrender your Christianity to nature; do not surrender to nature your birthright, which is eternal life; and do not think of eternal life as only that you are going to survive after this scene. Remember, it is a quality of life with all God's potentialities in it, all the potentialities of reaching the vastness of those Divine thoughts in Christ. Later, if the Lord wills, I may have something more to say about that, but I just leave it there, and for the present hasten to round it off.

We were saying that these are not just abstract ideas, this is positive, practical, experimental knowledge, the result of the free action of Divine life in us, the mystery and wonder, the marvel of Divine life within which knows no limitations. Thus, fulness is governed by two things. Firstly by life and spirituality. Those two are one, one is but the definition of the other. Life and spirituality; it is spiritual life, it is a spiritual state which that life produces. It is related entirely to all spiritual things, related to association with God, union with God, knowledge of God. That life makes the link and defines the nature of spirituality. Fulness is based upon that. If any of us live on the basis of nature, in the measure in which we do that, we are unspiritual and miss God. If, for instance, you are just trying to get round and get over the immensities of God's thoughts by reason, projecting your head into that realm and trying to comprehend with natural reason, you will not only do yourself harm and bring yourself to despair, but you will miss the way entirely. This requires the renewed, re-born spirit indwelt and taught by the Holy Spirit. You people who call yourselves thinking people, your reaction is, Where does human reason come in? Is it not a Divine gift? Yes; but it is an after instrument. You do not begin with it. You have to have it in order to communicate with other people who are on the same level, rational people. To be able to say to others what God has shown to you requires your brain, but you never get that revelation by means of your brain. You will undo yourself if you try, and you will miss the way. So it is on any other line of the natural, we will miss the way. How often we have been brought to the point where in despair we have said, I give it up, I cannot see, I cannot understand! and we have fallen down before the Lord and said, I have extended myself to the last fraction to try and understand and apprehend; now I give it up unless you show and reveal it to me. In the very simplest way, with the greatest of ease, light just begins to filter through, and you do not know exactly when it happened, but you are able to say, I see now! That is the nature of spiritual knowledge. It is always like that, it will ever be like that. It is life, it is spirituality. It is that you are in living union with God, and not as merely a fact but a process, you are continually living in union with God.

(b) Corporeality

And secondly, corporeality. We have earlier said that it will take the vast multitude, the countless host, to really comprehend and express the greatness of God's thoughts and intentions. The measure of our

spiritual growth will be very largely the measure of our fellowship with those who are growing. The Lord never just lays down laws in order to set up a system of laws. His laws are always the embodiment of His own thoughts, His laws are principles. It is a tremendous thing to be able to put your finger upon principles. Very often when precedent is not in existence, principle comes in with the power of law. You may not have a precedent for something, but there is a principle, and the principle is the precedent. Do you understand what I mean? You get the principle of a thing and you have the key to it all, and God is moving on principle, and anything that He says is not something just said to have things in a certain legal order, but because they are the embodiment of some great spiritual principle, because God is Spirit and everything that comes from God is spirit. When God says, "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together" (Heb. 10:25), He does not mean, Keep your meetings going. "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together... and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching". What day? The day of fulness, the day of consummation. Unto that you have to grow, and growth is corporate.

You know quite well, if the Body is more than a metaphor - and it is - that if you detach a member from the rest it will not grow any more. It is a simple law of corporate life. It depends entirely for its own increase upon its vital relationship to the rest, and otherwise any development of it will be entirely artificial. You might perhaps sever a member or organ from the body and give it some artificial stimulant and get some kind of growth, but it would be artificial because it is not governed by all the other governing functions of the body. The Body is no mere metaphor. It is a Divine thought embodying Divine principles and spiritual realities. This is why I said at the beginning - and I am keeping very close to the matter of Overcomers - that this is not something that you can join, take up, discuss. This is not something of special truths, the Church for instance, the Body of Christ. No, it is not doctrine just as truth. Overcomers are not those who are standing for truths, in that sense. This thing is the embodiment of spiritual laws without which, and without the observance of which, and the operation of which, these great ends and thoughts of God cannot be reached. The teaching of the Church which is His Body will not get us anywhere as teaching. We might well have meetings and circles and classes to discuss that, but that is not it. It is the spiritual reality of this, and you can only come into this organically. That demands the corporate, relatedness, the fellowship. So ultimately, you will find that the principle of the Overcomer works out like this - "Then they that feared the Lord..."; "and they overcame..." It begins with us individually and ends with us corporately.

I think I had better finish there for the present. We have only just got a little way into this matter of the nature of Overcomers. There are other very important things to note. Do not forget that God is after something which will be, as far as possible now in time, and then afterward, the embodiment of His full thoughts, not partial thoughts, not partial truths, not specific things, but the whole. If you look at Overcomers they represent a greatness, a wholeness, a comprehensiveness. It is the others who have lost; they are the greater company, but they have the lesser measure. The Overcomers are the smaller company but the greater measure, and that is what God is after, and it is that testimony to the greatest, fullest measure of God in Christ that God is seeking to have in a vessel; the greatest measure of Himself in Christ revealed in and through a vessel, call it a remnant if you like, call it Overcomers, what you like. It is the peculiar treasure and it is peculiarly a treasure of God because in it He finds a way for the larger measure of Himself.

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