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Equipping believers for the work of the ministry

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<p>Assistants to the Editor <i>Ann Marshall</i> <i>Bogdana Shuvar</i></p> <p>©Copyright 2003 Chafer Theological Seminary</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Chafer Theological Seminary 1800 East La Veta Avenue Orange, CA 92866 714–288–9555 800–68-GRACE [800–684–7223]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Email: cts@chafer.edu WEB: www.chafer.edu FAX: 714–288–1526</p>															

**ROMANS 8:
WHO ARE THE HEIRS?***
By Zane Hodges

Christian heirship is a great New Testament theme.¹ On this subject, the Apostle Paul has made a vital and instructive comment. We find his statement in Romans 8:16–17, where he writes: *The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.*

This declaration is often read as if only one heirship were in view. However, with only a slight alteration of the English punctuation (which is equally permissible in the original Greek), Paul's words may be read as follows: *and if children, then heirs—heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.*

Under this reading of the text, there are two forms of heirship. One of these is based on being children of God. The other is based on

* By gracious permission of the author, this article comes from *The Gospel Under Siege: Faith and Works in Tension*, 2d ed. (Dallas, TX: Redención Viva, 1992), 127–41, 180–83.

¹ It is particularly in reference to my discussion of heirship that some critics have thought that my ideas were without precedent in Christian literature. But in thinking so, they are seriously mistaken. Most of my suggestions on this theme were anticipated before the turn of the century by George N. H. Peters (1825–1909), *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 3 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1952), his magisterial magnum opus. He was born in Berlin, PA, graduated from Wittenberg College, and pastored a number of Lutheran churches in Ohio.

Another significant volume which anticipates the contents of this chapter to a considerable degree is G. H. Lang, *Firstborn Sons: Their Rights & Risks* (London: Roberts, 1936; reprint, Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle, 1984).

Although Lang held the view that unfaithful Christians, even though eternally saved, would miss the Millennium altogether, his analysis of the biblical teaching on Christian accountability is hard to surpass.

suffering with Christ. This distinction is crucial for understanding the New Testament teaching on this subject.

Double Heirship

The concept of two kinds of heirship is very natural indeed in the light of Old Testament custom. As is well known, in a Jewish family all the sons shared equally in their father's inheritance, except for the oldest, or firstborn, son who received a double portion. That is, he inherited twice as much as the other sons.

Against this background, Paul can be understood as saying that all of God's children are heirs, simply because they are children. But those who suffer with Christ have a special joint heirship with Christ. It is of great significance that later in this chapter Christ is actually described as the firstborn among many brethren (8:29).

Naturally, all believers are God's heirs. In the eternal future they will most assuredly inherit all of the blessings which are unconditionally promised to them. Among these is an eternal glory (Romans 8:30) which is inherent in the resurrection itself. Hence Paul can say, *The body is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power* (1 Corinthians 15:42–43). Elsewhere he writes that *we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body* (Philippians 3:20–21).

Of course, participation in the resurrection is unconditionally guaranteed to every believer in Christ. Jesus' own declaration on this point is definitive:

For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:38–40)

This passage is emphatic concerning the eternal security of the believer in Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ has never lost, nor will he ever lose, anyone who has belonged to Him through faith. But equally, though the word *inheritance* is not used here, such words seal the heirship of every

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Christian. A share in the glorious immortality of the future world is assured to the believer, because Jesus has promised to *raise him up at the last day*.

But in Romans 8:17, Paul speaks also of a *co-heirship* that results in *co-glory*. This contrast is a bit easier to see in Greek than it is in English.

In the Greek text, Paul juxtaposes two words for *heir*, one of which is the simple word for this, and the other a compound word roughly equal to our word *co-heir*. Likewise, two other compound words in Paul's text express the thought of *co-suffering* and *co-glorification*. As Paul's words make clear, such an heirship is dependent on something more than saving faith. This heirship is contingent on our experience of suffering with Christ.

Romans 8:17 thus confronts us with a double heirship. One of these is for all believers. The other is for believers who suffer in fellowship with Christ.

Co-Reigning with Christ: 2 Timothy 2:12

A similar thought occurs in 2 Timothy 2:12. There the Apostle writes: *If we endure, we shall also reign with Him*.

Here again we meet the thought of suffering. The Greek verb *endure* refers primarily to the endurance of hardships and trials. Moreover, the verb translated *reign with Him* is another compound word like those we met in Romans 8:17. The idea is: *If we endure [suffering], we shall co-reign* (the words *with Him* are implied by the compound verb).

Putting Romans 8:17 together with 2 Timothy 2:12, it is natural to conclude that to be co-glorified with Christ involves co-reigning with Him. In other words, the glory of co-heirship is more than merely participating in the glorious future world. It is to share the portion of the Firstborn Son of God and to *reign* in His Kingdom.²

² Peters, *Kingdom*, 1:570, writes most aptly: "Let the Davidic Kingdom be restored *as predicted*, and, in the very nature of the case, to verify the promises,

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With so glorious a prospect in view, no wonder Paul aspired to know Christ in *the fellowship of His sufferings* (Philippians 3:10)!

Service and Co-Reigning: Luke 19:11–27

The connection between fidelity to Christ and the privilege of sharing the authority of His Kingdom appears already in the teaching of Jesus Himself. Its most striking expression is found in the famous parable of the minas (or pounds) in Luke 19:11–27.

The parable begins with a reference to the inter-advent period in which we live today as we wait for the Kingdom of God. Jesus introduces the story with these words: *A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas, and said to them, “Do business till I come”* (Luke 19:12, 13).

It is easy to see how this relates to contemporary Christian experience. The minas (a mina was a unit of money) represent the potential for useful service to Christ with which every believer is entrusted. His marching orders are: *Do business till I come*.

According to the story which Jesus told, when the nobleman returned he called each of his servants to account. This clearly suggests the Judgment Seat of Christ (Romans 14:10–12; 2 Corinthians 5:9, 11; 1 Corinthians 3:11–15; 4:5). The outcome of this review, as the parable unfolds it, is varying degrees of authority in the Kingdom. The degree of

the Theocratic king will also have *His associated rulers assuring the most perfect government*, productive of peace, prosperity, and happiness, such as the world has never witnessed. The Word emphatically teaches that those thus chosen, accounted worthy of this rulership, are the saints. They are ‘*joint heirs*’ (Rom. 8:17) with Christ, who graciously divides, without marring His own superiority and supremacy (but rather exalts it thereby), His own inheritance with them” (italics his).

The words of G. H. Lang, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Practical Treatise for Plain and Serious Readers* (London: Paternoster, 1951), 56, are equally apposite: “Joseph, David, Daniel, Esther became more than subjects under their respective sovereigns. Each attained to rulership and glory. It is for such supreme honour that God is now training the co-heirs of His Son (Rom. 8:17, II Tim. 2:10–12).” Following the quoted statement, *ibid.*, 57, he also writes: “A royal father may have a large family, but of these only a few may prove competent to rule in the kingdom and share its glory.”

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authority is based on the measure of each servant's faithfulness and productivity. Thus one servant receives authority over ten cities (19:17), another over five (19:19).

Both servants are sharply distinguished from the unproductive servant, who is given no cities to rule and is even deprived of his mina (19:22–24). He thus bears an unmistakable resemblance to a Christian whose works are *burned up* and who *will be saved, yet so as through fire* (1 Corinthians 3:15). He had a job to do but he failed to do it. Therefore he is stripped of further responsibility. His mina is taken away.³

As emphasized in the previous chapters, it is an illusion to think that every Christian will necessarily persevere in holiness until the end of his life. Such a view finds no support in the New Testament. This is not to say that there *must be* believers who are totally without any good word or work whatsoever. The Scriptures do not teach that either. Even in 1 Corinthians 3:15 Paul only says, *If anyone's work is burned [up] . . .*"

So great is the miracle of regeneration that it is virtually unthinkable that it could have no effect at all on what a person says or does over an extended period of time. But God alone may see these effects and the absence of visible works in no way signals that a person is unsaved. However, those who teach that a lifelong perseverance in holiness *must be* the result of true conversion should read their New Testaments again—this time with their eyes open!⁴

³ It would be hard to improve on Lang's succinct statement of the central point of this parable. Lang, *Firstborn Sons*, 58–59, says: "Upon the return of the nobleman he richly rewarded those servants who had been diligent and successful during his absence. And the special reward indicated is that '*authority over cities*' was given in proportion to their fidelity; that is, they were appointed to high places in the kingdom of their lord. And thus both the governmental authority and personal glory of our Lord He will most graciously and royally share with such as are accounted worthy of these dignities. And the degree of our faithfulness now will be the measure of our worthiness then" (italics his).

⁴ Michael Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 76–77, definitely has his eyes open when, commenting on 2 Peter 1:11, he writes: "This passage agrees with several in the Gospels and Epistles in suggesting that while heaven is entirely a gift of grace, it admits of degrees of felicity, and that these are dependent upon how faithfully we have built a

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The wicked servant in Jesus' parable failed to engage in his lord's business with the mina he had been given. He was not involved in serving his master. Whether or not he did other commendable things is not the point of the parable. At least he did not *labor* for his lord. As a result, he does not co-reign with his master over even a single city!

That he also went to hell would be an absurd and unfounded deduction from this parable.

All Christians, then, are heirs of God. But they are not heirs to an equal degree. Their fidelity to the service of Christ, with all its attendant hardships and sufferings, will be the gauge by which that heirship will be measured out to them. Not to teach this simple truth is to deprive believers of one of the most powerful motivations to endurance which the Scriptures contain.

Inheriting the Kingdom: 1 Corinthians 6:9–10

It is not surprising that those who do not recognize the truths being discussed are impoverished in their ability to motivate both themselves and other believers. Tragically, they often fall back on the technique of questioning the salvation of those whose lives do not meet Biblical standards. But in the process, they undermine the grounds for a believer's assurance and take part (however unwittingly) in the siege of the Gospel.

Paul did not do this, even though he has sometimes been read as if he did. In writing to the Corinthian church he is exasperated that they engage in lawsuits against one another. Of course, he does not question the salvation of those who do this. Instead he says, *But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers!* (1 Corinthians 6:6).

The enormous disgrace of this, from Paul's point of view, is that Christians carry Christians to court where unsaved people preside. He denounces this emphatically.

structure of character and service upon the foundation of Christ. Bengel likens the unholy Christian in the judgment to a sailor who just manages to make shore after shipwreck, or to a man who barely escapes with his life from a burning house, while all his possessions are lost.”

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His criticism of such conduct continues:

Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated? No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and you do these things to your brethren! (1 Corinthians 6:7–8)

It is precisely at this point that the Apostle turns to the theme of heirship, for he goes on to say:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9–10)

It is as plain as possible that the Apostle intends these words as a warning against the kind of conduct he has been describing in the Corinthian Christians. This is made doubly obvious by the opening statement that *the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God*. Paul has just charged them with being unrighteous (*you yourselves do wrong*). The connection is clearer in Greek than in English. The word translated *you do wrong* in verse 8 is the Greek verb *adikeite*, and the word for *unrighteous* in verse 9 is a related word, *adikoi*.

What Paul is saying is that the Corinthians are engaged in conduct that can make it impossible to inherit the Kingdom of God. Persistence in this type of behavior will obviously disqualify them from this kind of heirship. No other deduction about Paul's meaning can possibly be fair to the text.

Paul Knows His Readers Are Saved

But does he thereby call their salvation into question? That is precisely what he does not do. Instead he writes, *And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11)*.

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Paul is so far from suggesting to them that perhaps they are not Christians at all, that he even appeals to the fact that they *are!*⁵

Obviously, Paul's catalogue of sins (verses 9, 10) lays heavy stress on immorality. This was also a major problem with the conduct of the Corinthian Christians (see 1 Corinthians 5:1–13; 6:12–20). But always he appeals to the certainty that they are Christians, not to any possibility that they are not. So he can say, *Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not!* (1 Corinthians 6:15).

And he ends the chapter with this appeal:

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's (6:19–20).

The Apostle's whole argument for moral behavior by his readers is based on the fact that they are truly God's temple and members of the Body of Christ. They ought to act like what they are.

The widespread idea that Paul actually doubted (or could doubt) the salvation of his readers on the basis of their behavior is so far from his real perspective that it is incomprehensible how that conclusion could ever be drawn. Such an approach to his statements here about heirship is so hopelessly confused that it manages to miss his point entirely. It draws from these statements an outlook that was totally foreign to Paul's mind.

⁵ Most appropriately Lang, *Firstborn Sons*, 110, writes on 1 Corinthians 6:8–9 as follows: "This warning is addressed to those of whom Paul could acknowledge, 'Such *were* some of you, but ye washed yourselves, but ye were sanctified, but ye were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God' (I Cor. v. 11). But now he has to say, 'Ye yourselves (the pronoun is emphatic: I am not talking of worldlings, but of you same individuals), ye yourselves *do wrong* (*adikeite*), and defraud": "know ye not that *wrong-doers* (the noun of the same verb, *adikoi*) shall not inherit the kingdom of God?' Thus he asserts (1) that those who have been justified, sanctified, and washed from their old sins, may *do wrong* and *were doing it*; and (2) that *wrong-doers* (there is no article) shall not inherit the kingdom" (italics his).

In speaking of heirship in 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10, the Apostle did not threaten his readers with the loss of eternal salvation. He did not even raise a question about their salvation. But he warned them plainly that, if they did not correct their unrighteous behavior, they confronted a serious consequence. They would not inherit the Kingdom of God.

To Inherit the Kingdom

Many have assumed that to *inherit* the Kingdom must be the same as entering it. But why should such an equation be made?

Even in everyday speech there is a difference between saying, for example, “you will *live* in that house” and “you will *inherit* it.” If a wealthy man tells me that I will inherit his house, has he told me nothing more than that I shall reside in it someday? Obviously, he has told me more than that. He has told me that I will own that house.

It is extremely careless not to give deeper thought to a significant concept like inheriting the Kingdom of God.

In fact, a survey of the Biblical use of the word *to inherit* shows that it is most frequently a synonym for *to possess* or *to own*. Equally, the word *inheritance* usually indicates *property* of some sort which a person *owns*. One can find numerous passages where this is true (for example, Genesis 15:7–8; Exodus 34:9; Leviticus 20:24; 25:46; Numbers 16:14; 18:21; 26:52–55; Deuteronomy 12:12; Joshua 17:14; Judges 2:6; Ruth 4:5; 1 Kings 21:2, 3; Job 42:15; Mark 12:7; Acts 7:5; and many more).

If we keep the idea of ownership in mind, obviously the kingdom is not *owned* by those who are only citizens there. Citizens are *subjects* of a kingdom, not its *owners*. Instead, it is the king to whom a kingdom really belongs.

It is not surprising, then, to find the future Kingdom of God described as an inheritance and as a possession of God’s Son. So the Psalmist writes:

Yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: the Lord has said to Me, “You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the

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ends of the earth for Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.” (Psalm 2:6–9)

If the future Kingdom of God is seen as the *inheritance* of the King, God's Son, one thing surely follows. Those who also *inherit* that Kingdom must be those who co-reign with the King!

But for this privilege, perseverance in holiness is an indispensable condition. That point is plainly stated in Revelation 2:26–27:

And he who overcomes and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—he shall rule them with a rod of iron; they shall be dashed to pieces like the potter's vessels—as I also received from My Father.

Note that the faithful believer gets precisely what God promised in Psalm 2 as an *inheritance* for His Son! This is co-heirship.

A similar promise is found in Revelation 3:21: *To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.*

It is clear that spiritual victory—and keeping Christ's works until the end—are essential if one wishes to sit with Him on His throne.⁶ But

⁶ Peters, *Kingdom*, 1:600, repeatedly insists on the truth that only faithful believers will co-reign with Christ. Thus one of his main subject headings (“Proposition 90”) is “*Members of the Church, who are faithful, are promised this Kingdom*” (italics in the original). Again, he writes: “Only believers *are promised* this Kingdom. Faith and its fruits are essential to its inheritance (ibid., 1:601). This is pointedly declared in Scripture, as e.g. Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5, etc.” (italics his). Peters also recognized the possible loss of this privilege. Quoting a ministerial writer named Graff, Peters, *Kingdom*, 2:591–92, affirms:

Graff (“Greybeard”) in his “Lay Sermons,” No. 6, truly observes that “the present or ecclesiastical dispensation may therefore be said to be allotted to the development of Christ's *aristocracy, the nobility* of His Kingdom, *the ruling class* in the world to come.” After urging that humility precedes exaltation, he says: “If Christians were not forgetful of the distinguished honors which await them in the future, they would be less concerned about the honors and emoluments of the present.” Pregnant words; but, alas, how few heed the lesson imparted. In No. 13 he has some thoughtful words on: “the Reward of Good Works that is superadded to Salvation,” in which

could there be any greater challenge to such victory than so splendid an outcome?

In 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, Paul’s point is simple and direct. Unrighteous people of the type he describes can never be co-heirs with Jesus Christ. They can never *inherit* the Kingdom of God. And that is exactly what some of the Corinthians *formerly were*. But now the slate has been wiped clean by the grace of God. *You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified*. So Paul is saying, don’t become that kind of person again. Don’t forfeit the inheritance that otherwise can be yours.

In the light of verse 11, then, it is even astounding that anyone has found a “test” of salvation in this passage. Paul is addressing these who are justified, set apace, and cleansed.

How could he have said it more plainly?

Rewards: A Biblical Motivation

The Pauline passage found in Galatians 5:19–21 is similar to 1 Corinthians 6:9–11. It can be interpreted in exactly the same way. In Galatians, also, the statement about inheriting the Kingdom of God occurs in the head of an exhortation that warns believers against

occurs the following sentence: “And although the literature of the Church abounds in ‘crowns for the departed,’ it is not improbable that there will be many crownless heads on the day when the Lord shall appear to receive them, inasmuch as the three crowns (whatever they may typify) designated in the Scriptures, are mentioned in each case as the reward of some special service or merit. (The ‘crown of righteousness’ to those that ‘love His appearing’; the ‘crown of glory’ to those who endure temptation and persecution.”) Whatever may be thought of this attempted distinction of crowns, the idea of loss, of simple salvation [i.e., salvation without reward], is a correct one, as e.g. evidenced by the apostles’ teaching in 1 Cor. 3:8–15.” (italics his).

A couple of sentences later, he also says: “The unspeakable honor [of kingship with Christ] thus conferred explains why the demands of God in reference to supreme love to Him, unreserved surrender to His Will, etc., are, as required in this dispensation, not fanatical requirements (as unbelief suggests), but essential in view of qualifying the saints for this rulership” (*ibid.*).

It is not too much to say that, if such truths were widely known and taught in the Church today, the Church would not be so severely troubled by the doctrinal confusion which begets “lordship salvation.”

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fulfilling *the lust of the flesh* (Gal. 5:16–26). Evidently the Apostle used this truth about the Kingdom as a powerful motivational technique for his Christian brethren. And so should we.⁷

In fact, the Scriptures open up to the faithful believer a marvelous and highly motivating vision of the future. The promises to the overcomers in Revelation 2 and 3 are a significant part of this vision.

For example, it is in Revelation 2 that we meet the mysterious tree of life: *To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God* (Revelation 2:7).

Clearly this is a *reward* for the overcomer. A person who has Christ within him will not need a physical tree, however wonderful, to sustain his spiritual life. Yet obviously such a tree could offer some kind of superlative enrichment of one's experience in the Kingdom of God. But whatever the tree of life has to impart to those who are granted the right to partake of it, this must be truly worth striving for.

It seems evident that in exploring the territory set before us in these promises to the overcomers, we come close to realities impossible to

⁷ The intensely motivational character of this truth shines through in Lang's skilled articulation of it as Lang, *Hebrews*, 52–53, comments on Hebrews 2:5 (*For He has not put the world to come . . . in subjection to angels*): "In the purpose of God the *oikoumenē* [world] of the future has not been put under the control of angels, but of men. This is a key thought, the resolving of many obscurities and perplexities which hinder believers from grasping the exact significance of the plans of God and the final and highest outcome of redemption. It is the key to some present enigmas also. At present God is not saving the human race entire and its affairs corporate, but is selecting from it the company that are to rule the universe, superseding the existing government. He is preparing for a complete reorganization of His entire empire, and is giving to these future rulers the severe training which is indispensable to fitting them for such responsible duties and high dignities. The Gospel has *not failed*, but is fulfilling the purpose God plainly announced, though not the end that many preachers have mistakenly proposed, namely, the conversion of the whole race. That general and most desirable betterment of this sin-cursed earth is in the plans of God, but falls for accomplishment of the *next* period of the divine programme, not in this age. There is manifest wisdom in a great Leader first training a body of efficient subordinates before seeking to recognize society at large." If there is a more elevating paragraph on this theme in Christian literature, this writer has not found it!

describe precisely to men still in their earthbound flesh. Paul had once been exposed to *inexpressible words* which he was not allowed to repeat (2 Corinthians 12:4). The vagueness surrounding the promise of the tree of life is an example of the deliberate indefiniteness of the rewards mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3. Almost all of the other promises to overcomers have something of the same undefined, but spiritual, character.

Yet this very vagueness makes the rewards more tantalizing and alluring. Motivation through rewards is found frequently in the New Testament.

Postscript: Revelation 2:11 and 3:5

However, there are two promises to overcomers which are often taken as a threat to the security of the believer. These are:

He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death. (Revelation 2:11)

He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. (Revelation 3:5; emphasis added)

Both promises are best understood as examples of litotes. Litotes is the name for a figure of speech in which a positive idea is stated by negating its opposite. We use it all the time in everyday speech.

Some examples may help: “that test was no snap” (meaning, “the test was hard”); “this suit sure isn’t a bargain” (“this suit’s expensive”); “he couldn’t solve it to save his life” (“he’s completely stumped”); “you aren’t the first to make that mistake” (“lots of people have made the mistake”); Hebrews 6:9—“God is not unjust to forget your work” (in context, “God will remember and stand by you”).

One frequent feature of litotes is that the negative statement is so obviously true (“God is not unjust”) or so clearly exaggerated (“you are not the first”) that the positive idea easily suggests itself (“God is fair” or “many others preceded you”). Such is the case in Revelation 2:11 and 3:5.

The first century hearer or reader of Revelation, who knew John's doctrine, *knew* that no Christian was in danger of the second death or of having his name erased from the Book of Life (see John 4:13–14; 5:24; 6:37–40; etc.). Thus it was self-evident (obviously true) that a Christian would *not be hurt by the second death* or that Christ would *not blot out his name from the Book of Life*. Litotes is thus suggested. A positive idea is implied.

What is the positive idea implied in 2:11? Verse 10 gives us some direction: *Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life* (emphasis added). The overcomer will have a superlative, crowning experience of life in the age to come. So much so, in fact, that to say he is not hurt by the second death is an enormous understatement. Life *far beyond* the reach of the second death is implied.⁸ To say it another way (using litotes), the overcomer is certainly *not* among those who are *saved . . . through fire* (2 Corinthians 3:15)!

What is the positive idea implied in 3:5? This time direction is offered by the closing words of the verse: *but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels*. The overcomer will possess a glorious name which is highly honored before God and the angels. To say that the Lord will *not blot out his name from the Book of Life* is an enormous understatement. A name *far above* such disgrace as that is implied.⁹ To say it another way (again using litotes), God will certainly *not blot out the remembrance* of the overcomer *from under heaven* (cf. Exodus 17:14)!

Finally, let it be observed that the litotes in Revelation 2:11 and 3:5 fit the indefinite and spiritual character of all the promises to

⁸ Fred[ric]k A. Tatford, *Prophecy's Last Word: An Exposition of the Elevation* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1947), 46, clearly thinks in terms of litotes when he writes about the promise of Revelation 2:11 as follows: "True life lay beyond. In no wise should he be touched by the second death and the very form of the expression but emphasizes the certainty of that truer and fuller life."

⁹ Again Tatford interprets through litotes when he writes this about Revelation 3:5: "Practically every city of that day kept a roll or register of its citizens . . . one who had performed some great exploit deserving of special distinction, was honoured by having his name inscribed in golden letters in the citizen's roll. Our Lord's emphatic statement, therefore, implies not merely that the name of the overcomer shall not be expunged, but *per contra* that it shall be inscribed in golden letters in the heavenly roll" (ibid., 62–63).

overcomers. In each of these promises we catch only a glimpse of the reward that is offered. Each reward is deeply attractive. The inspired text deliberately leaves us wanting to know more.

Conclusion

One further point needs to be made. 1 John 5:4–5 cannot be used to define the term *overcomer* in Revelation 2 and 3. The content and thrust of each context are widely different. 1 John 5:4–5 declare that faith in Christ is itself a victory over the world which lies under Satanic delusion (1 John 5:18; compare 2 Corinthians 4:3–6). In that sense all believers are overcomers. But Revelation 2 and 3 are talking about the struggles and snares faced by the Christians in the various churches of Asia. It is by no means declared that all of them will overcome. A careful reading of the seven letters will show that the opposite is suggested.

As one writer has correctly pointed out in connection with the promises to the overcomers: “A command that everyone keeps is superfluous, and a reward that everyone receives for a virtue everyone has is nonsense.”¹⁰

It is utterly unbiblical to claim that fidelity, even to the point of martyrdom (Revelation 2:10), and dedication to resist the spiritual corruption and decline all around us (Revelation 2:5, 15–16; 3:3–4; etc.) are inevitable results of simply being a true Christian. Those who claim this are looking at life from an ivory tower that is totally divorced from

¹⁰ J. William Fuller, “‘I Will Not Erase His Name from the Book of Life’ (Revelation 3:5),” *JETS* 26 (September 1983): 299. He goes on to say, “Surely the burden of proof is on the shoulders of those who would argue that the warnings are not genuinely addressed to true believers as they seem to be and that the promises are genuinely addressed to all believers (as they seem not to be). Hence the ‘overcomer’ is the individual Christian who enjoys special benefits in eternity for refusing to give up his faith in spite of persecution during life on earth” (ibid.). Of course, this general view of the overcomers has a long and respectable history. See, for example, J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible, 5: Colossians—The Revelation* (reprint, Kingston-On-Thames: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, 1949), 380; William Kelly, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation*, new ed. (London: Morrish, n.d.), 36; Walter Scott, *Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 4th ed. (London: Pickering & Inglis, n.d.), 64–65.

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the down-to-earth realism of the New Testament writers. If we refuse to face the possibility of failure, we in fact prepare the way for failure.

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.
(1 Corinthians 10:12)

The price of spiritual victory is high. Let no one be under any delusion about that. But the price is well worth paying. Every sacrifice will be more than amply rewarded. And at the end of the path lies co-heirship with the King of kings.¹¹

—End—

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¹¹ Lang, *Hebrews*, 71, succinctly capsulizes what is central to this chapter when he writes: “Salvation from perdition is definitely without works (Rom. 4:1–8), and to teach otherwise is to falsify the gospel: but equally definitely ruling with Christ depends on works, as Rev. 2:26 states, and to teach otherwise is to falsify our hope, by putting it on a false basis.”