

Following the Lamb

By Edward Irving

*(The Revelation of Jesus Christ, Book 10, "Epistle to the Church in Laodicea,"
Chapter VI "The Exhortation")*

Revelation 3

²¹ To him that overcomes will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in His throne.

WE HAVE set forth the wonderful grace which is here promised to us in the day of the Lord's appearing; and we would now use the same for application unto all the children of men, that they may gird themselves to the battle, enter the fight, and overcome.

How Christ Overcame

And, first, I would propound the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, who laid aside His glory, and entered in weakness that field of combat; for which the first qualification is, that we should be likewise weak, yea, and utterly empty of all strength in ourselves. For it is a combat wherein God, not man, is to be glorified; and therefore when Christ became man, He must become a weak and empty man, in order that the glory of the victory may be due unto Godhead, and not unto the manhood.

They understand nothing of this matter, who will maintain that His manhood must be in itself and of itself, other and better than our own. That way of it was tried already in Adam, and it came to naught. Another way of it, which is the way of weakness, made strong by faith in God, is now in the progress of trial; and for the trial Christ presents himself, who was not made a creature. If a creature He had been made, and found himself mortal, He must have been answerable for the guilt of so making himself. But He is the Creator, and therefore may take what form of being it pleases Him, that which is best for the glory of God to take.

And seeing the point which God has been making good, is that He is gracious to the fallen, and forgiving to the sinful, and strengthening to the weak, if they will but trust in Him, the Son of God, who came to realize this lesson, became poor, and weak, and suffering, was made sin, though without sin, and brought under the weight of all burdens, and smitten with all strokes, and had no resource nor help, nor maintenance, but what He obtained through the exercise of faith in His Father, and in our Father, in His God, and in our God.

He stood in the battle as a common man; and if there was one post harder than another, that was the post He was called upon to maintain: yea the whole tide of battle rolled against this single man; and single-handed He had to encounter the fiercest shock; and this with no weapons, but the weapons of our warfare, weakness and faith, which in His hand ever proved effectual to the pulling down of all the strongholds of the enemy,—to the disarming of all our foes, to the capturing of them, and the leading of them captive.

This is what He had to do, and what He did. And it is a damnable doctrine to teach, that He had *any advantage over us* in the field. They are teachers of error, who say that His flesh was otherwise constituted than ours is. And I pray devoutly that they may be converted. If this be the doctrine they are preaching in this land, and the people will receive it, then the Church shall soon become a Church abandoned of the Lord.

They are very slow of giving forth what they hold: we gather it more from what they oppose. But if they be holding that Christ's flesh was not weak and tempted as ours is, they hold the doctrine of heretics; and if they cleave unto it as their faith, they stand in peril of death. They may talk of atonement, and substitution, and satisfaction how they please; it is all a system of indulgences, if they believe not that Christ came in our flesh, and overcame our temptations in the flesh, and crucified His flesh, and sanctified it as a sacrifice, and presented it holy thus, and in no other way.

There are a set of ministers who have been stirred up to fight against this truth; and who are driving the Church into the awful guilt of condemning it in our persons who hold it, and in our books which contain it. I hope and pray the Church will have grace given her to resist these stirrers of strife, all holy as they seem to be; but if not, then the Church will seal her own death-warrant, and die by her own hand.

Oh, my mother Church! I say unto you, as David said to Jonathan:

1 Samuel 20

³ As the Lord lives, there is but a step between [you] and death.

That step these evil counselors would have you take; because, like the Pharisees of old, they are full of self-sufficiency, and know not the awful thing which they are about to do. God only knows how my heart is rent and torn asunder, and how my bowels are pained, and my zeal stirred up. I will not give place to these men; no, not for a moment. And I call upon every child of God, upon every minister and man who knows the truth in the realm of Scotland, to put on his armor, and contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.

What were the meaning of the Lord's calling upon us to overcome as He also overcame, if so be that He did not overcome as He would have us to overcome? If the battle was not arrayed against Him, as against us it is arrayed, or if He had, in virtue of His Godhead or of His manhood, weapons of offense and defense, which we have not in Him, what is the meaning of asking us to overcome, as He also overcame?

The Nature of the Battle

The same truth is taught us in all other parts of Scripture. For examples of this, take first, what He says to the twelve Apostles, upon the occasion of the young rich man, who would not part with his all, to follow Him into poverty, and the preaching of the Gospel.

Matthew 19

²⁷ Then answered Peter, and said unto Him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed You: what shall we have therefore?

²⁸ And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That you which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man shall sit in the throne of His glory, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

²⁹ And every one that has forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.

Here is much the same language as in the promise before us: He assures these twelve of the royalty over the tribes of Israel; by which I understand, that as Christ himself shall be King of the Jews, the twelve Apostles shall be His twelve viceroys in that dominion. And I believe that after the same manner the most faithful of the martyrs in each several region of the earth, shall in that day of His glorious appearing have a local superintendency, being, as it were, to take advantage of Satan's rehearsal, the legates, envoys, and nuncios from the regal and metropolitan city of the new Jerusalem.

Observe also, that these dignities and rewards are bestowed upon us against that day,

Matthew 19

²⁸ ...when the Son of Man shall sit in the throne of His glory.

Which being interpreted according to the foregoing prophecies upon the Son of Man, carries us to the 7th chapter of *Daniel*, where is the full and distinct exhibition of the throne of glory, and the Son of Man's receiving it to sit upon, and with it the kingdoms of all the earth to distribute among His saints.

Moreover, this same passage of Matthew's Gospel does exhibit to us the kind of warfare to which He calls His disciples; not against depravity and lust, and avarice, and other gross sins, heinous even in the world's eye, but against the strongest and

most honorable, yea, and dutiful affections of the heart; not against worthless, lawless, and profligate persons, alike hated of God and man, but against the most near and dear relations, the fastest and closest friends, brethren, sisters, father, mother, wife and children.¹

When in another place He says, we must not only forsake but absolutely hate;² that is, hate in the same sense in which God has said, “I hate Esau,” and other wicked persons, though they be His own creatures, made in His image, for whose ransom He has given His own Son to suffer and die. And like as God surrenders all natural ties, when His holiness is in question, nor suffers for a moment a balance in His mind, between affection and holiness; but as He loves them, and because He loves them, divorces them from all enjoyment of His countenance, and hope of His favor, unless they will kiss the Son, and yield unto Him obedience; even so He commands us, to count every natural affection hateful, and our very parents our enemies, *if they would rise up against Christ*.

And with respect to the goods of this world, it is not the honors and preferments merely of the world which we are called to be denied unto, but even to give up our houses and our lands, and everything which we are wont to call our own. Such are the contentions and controversies of which the Christian warfare is made up:

- Contentions against all that is dear and honorable in the world;
- Controversies with our own heart, with the best and most virtuous feelings of our heart.

All these, Christ for His Father’s sake forewent, and became motherless and brotherless, houseless and homeless; preferring His Father’s pleasure to the eating of His daily bread, and having found His Father faithful to His word, yea far more generous than His word, yielding Him not the throne of David His Father, but

¹ *Matthew* 19:29.

² *Luke* 14:26.

the throne of God His Father, He cries unto His followers, whom He left treading the same winepress of tears and sorrows, to be of good cheer, to go on with the heart-crucifying work, and surely to expect the fellowship of His heavenly throne.

Revelation 7

¹⁴ These are they who have come out of great tribulation...

¹⁵ Therefore are they before the throne of God...

The Nature of the Battle Confirmed

Another beautiful illustration of the promise in the text is to be found in the 16th chapter of the same Gospel; where, at the twenty-first verse we are informed that the Lord began to discourse to His disciples concerning the sorrowful and suffering path through which He was to win the dignity of “The Christ, the Son of the living God;”³ which Peter not savoring:⁴

Matthew 16

²⁴ Jesus said unto His disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

²⁵ For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

²⁶ For what is a man profited, if He shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

²⁷ For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of His Father with His angels: and then He shall reward every man according to his works.

Here, as in the former case, the reward presented in the distance, is His coming in the glory of His Father, as it is also in our text; and the scale according to which the rewards of heaven are to be dispensed, is:

- self-denial,
- taking up of the cross,
- indifference to this present life,

³ *Matthew 16:16.*

⁴ *Matthew 16:22.*

- readiness for martyrdom at all times, and
- a willingness to part with the whole world rather than to put our souls into jeopardy.

Of works of this sort are the thrones of heaven the meed. I would I saw some more of them!

Who of us can nowadays take joyfully the spoiling of their goods as did the Hebrews?⁵ Who of us rejoice and are exceeding glad when men revile us, and speak all manner of evil against us falsely for Christ's sake?⁶ I know what it is to have been reproached for the truth of Christ; would that I knew more of joy under the temptation. The school is now so forsaken that there are neither masters nor scholars in it anymore.

And why this unsuffering state of the Church? Because she has been ignorant of the rewards of suffering. The doctrine of the Church since the Reformation, has been taken up chiefly with the question:

“How are we to get off at the judgment-seat?”

And they have hardly dared to think of the question:

“How are we to obtain the dignities of the world to come?”

Indeed the world to come has been a visionary *Elysium*⁷ of ghosts; not the *terra firma*⁸ of this material world, governed by embodied men. That prison allowance of doctrine will do no longer for the followers of Christ, who must have both wine and milk, and marrow and fatness; because it is no longer a question of sects, or a strife of words, but it is a battle with an infidel world, with a Pharisaical Church which we have to wage.

⁵ Hebrews 10:34.

⁶ Matthew 5:11.

⁷ In Greek mythology, originally the paradise to which heroes on whom the gods conferred immortality were sent.

⁸ From Latin: “solid earth.”

We are about to bear the brunt of brothers blows, and to be cast out of the house by brethren; and our Brother is thus early beginning to entreat us with discourse concerning the thrones of His Father's house. Like a good captain on the eve of battle, He sets out to His soldiers the rich rewards and splendid endowments which abide them after the conflict. But in every other battle, only the survivors receive the reward; in this one, all, as well those who lose their lives in His service, as those who wear out the time till His appearing.

Paul's Description of the Battle

This doctrine of rewards in the kingdom of glory, proportionate to our forfeitures in the kingdom of patience and suffering, we would illustrate a little further, as it is so seldom borne in mind; hardly even mooted in the Church, too intent upon the question,

“By what means she may satisfy Christ her *hard* master?”

—to think of any glorious aims or heavenly ambitions. Let us then take that noble instance of Paul described by himself in the 3rd chapter of the *Philippians*, wherein having delineated his high degree and distinction among the Pharisees, he declares not merely that he had foregone them all, but that he nauseated them as vile things; he hated them as the splendid trappings of his bondage; to the end he might obtain Christ's righteousness, and know Him, and the power of His resurrection,⁹ which enables us to enter into new life; and the fellowship of His sufferings, which is the yielding that new life to the encounter of all trials, that its heavenly temper of joy and proof of faith may the more appear.

Sufferings to such an extent does he covet, as that he may be conformed to Christ's death, or be brought into as weak, sorrowful, and passive a state as Christ died in. And why all this panting after the lowliest and most painful experiences of the Christian life? In order that by all means he might attain unto the resurrection of the dead; that is, the resurrection out from among the

⁹ *Philippians* 3:10.

dead, the resurrection unto life, the first resurrection, of which every one that partakes is a crowned king.¹⁰

That this is the thing which he has in his mind, he declares in the context twice over; calling it first: “that for which Christ had apprehended him”¹¹ or laid hold on him, or, as it were, enlisted him into the service. Christ had chosen him for this dignity, and, setting it before the young soldier, said:

“Now win your prize, and disappoint not my choice; keep your post, and achieve your reward!”

Therefore, he adds a second form of his eagerness:

Philippians 3

¹³ ...forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,

¹⁴ I press towards the mark for the prize of the high [above] calling in Christ Jesus.

That is, the calling to the new Jerusalem which is above, the city of the thrones of God.

After this beautiful picture of the great Apostle of the Gentiles, struggling in the heat of battle for the palm of victory, it is most delightful to peruse another passage of his mature age, and, as it were, veteran experience. The old experienced captain and field-marshal is giving his last counsel to a young soldier whom he was to leave in his room; and thus loftily the strain proceeds:

2 Timothy 4

⁵ But watch in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of your ministry.

⁶ For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand.

⁷ I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith:

¹⁰ *Revelation 20:4.*

¹¹ *Philippians 3:12.*

⁸ Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous Judge shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing.

He no longer stands in doubt, but is assured not only of his safety, but of his crown. And wherefore assured? Because he had fought the good fight. The like assurance may we, ought we, all through the same means to attain unto. I would that it were more sought after. I would that Christians would bear in mind that they are apprehended or taken up by Christ, not merely to get clear of, and escape condemnation, but to inherit honor and glory, and eternal life.

An Appeal to Laodicea

Why are men so low-thoughted with respect to the other world, when they are so ambitious with respect to this? It is because they think God less generous than man. It is because they wish just as much religion as will bring them off; and for the rest of their time and talents, they waste it all for other purposes. They would not like to have hell-fire flaming upon them, and scaring all their happiness. Escape from this they are willing to purchase by so many hours of church-going, and such a percentage of charities, and so much of what they understand by faith and good works. But as to the honors of the world to come, they desire the more solid honors of the present, and do not thank you for any discourse thereof at all. Keep hell's mouth under the horizon, and they care not for any of the stars of heaven. The riches of the earth content them, and the honors and the lands too: they have not the slightest intention of giving them up, on any future account. They prefer these in hand, to those upon God's word, better though they may be accounted.

Truly, the cloak of Romanism was better than this Protestant rag of religion. The only good of Protestantism is, that it carries in itself its own principle of rectification, which Romanism does not. And yet not even this; if we are to be forced to square ourselves

by articles of certain synods, instead of the word of God. The question is not Trent or Westminster with the Protestant, but man's word or God's word. If we are to lose this, then I wish to know, of what use was the Reformation? Oh, but it is come to low waters with us now in the Churches! And yet all is not lost.

I do, therefore, by the example and the promise of our Lord Jesus Christ; by the reward into which He has entered; and by the assurance of the like reward which the Apostles had within their hearts; by the words of the Holy Scriptures, and especially by the triumph of the faithful exhibited in the book of the Apocalypse,—I do call upon those angels of the Churches, who, like this Laodicean, are at present rejoicing in popular favor, and living at their ease in comfort and contentment, abundant in goods and prospering in the world's favor, straightway to disengage their hearts from those vanities, and sit loose to all those worldly affections, to trim their lamps, and let their light shine in the midst of the world. For lack of such illumination the people are stumbling upon the dark mountains, and are ready to be engulfed in destruction's yawning pit.

Proverbs 29

¹⁸ Where there is no vision the people perish.

There is little or no vision in the Church, and the people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.¹² We are the watchmen, but we have not been faithful upon the walls of Zion.¹³ We are afraid of the damps of the chilly night; we are afraid of the arrows of the enemy; we love sleep and slumbering, the feast and the wine cup, and the chief rooms in the synagogue, and flatteries and gifts, and other such soft and smooth allotments. Our phrase is measured, our words are accommodated: God is not so much in the thoughts of the preacher as himself and the people.

“If I lose their good opinion, if I lose their ear, I lose all; what will it avail if I preach them all away from my Church?”

¹² *Hosea* 4:6.

¹³ *Isaiah* 62:6.

Oh, brother, you are set for preaching the truth, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear. Let Paul's conduct at Corinth, as recorded in the 19th chapter of the *Acts*, be your guide. He first reasoned with both Jews and Greeks for many days; then he was pressed in spirit and testified; and when they would not receive his testimony he did shake off the dust of his garments against them, and turn unto the Gentiles. If we were faithful men and under the leading of the Holy Ghost, we would do likewise; we would reason and debate the matter with the present deadness and darkness of the Church; and if we prevailed, as with many we doubtless would prevail, it were well: but if many, and the greater number still held out against the truth, we would clear our conscience and leave it with them, and betake ourselves to other parts; for the world is wide and populous, and a preacher's commission is to every creature under heaven.

My dear brethren, do you think that without suffering for Christ's sake you shall ever enter into His glory? Do you think that without tribulation you shall ever be made perfect? I do entreat you to go into battle and endure hardness as good soldiers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Keep vigils over the armor of the word of God. Why will you not awaken and be up and doing? for the day is far spent, and the night is at hand. What means this monotony of preaching, when the enemies of Christ are mustering their hosts to the battle against the camp of the saints, and the holy city? Why do you not sound an alarm of war? What means this piping in the shade, O shepherds, when the wolf is in the midst of the flock, ravening over his prey? Would Christ ever have won the inheritance of His Father's throne, if He had thus idled in His Father's work? And will you ever attain to the fellowship of Christ's throne, if you thus saunter about dallying with your idol of popular favor, and seeking honor of one another?

Surely there is a need for some sufferer to set the example of suffering to the rest. Words will no longer avail. Men's conscience is seared, and the faith of words is gone. Works now must come, if the Church is to be saved. Persecution and suffering alone can

awaken the Church. The Pharisees must have blood, they have already taken the life-blood of her good name: they must have more, and then the stupefied Church will know what their true nature is.

Still I linger and long over the Church with hopes, and would fain prevent calamity. And therefore I do call upon those who have understanding of these things, and know the Laodicean state of the Church, to enter into suffering on this account, and to sorrow as the Lord did sorrow over the impenitent and foredoomed Jerusalem. Thus shall they walk in His footsteps, and attain unto His crown. The depth of the Lord's sorrow was His perfect holiness: hence arose at one and the same time His sharp discernment of sin, His suffering from its presence, His abhorrence of its contact; and His continual crucifixion of himself on account of it. And it was by this maintenance of God's abhorrence of sin, though in the midst of it always, that He purchased for himself the honor and glory of the everlasting kingdom:

Hebrews 1

⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated iniquity; therefore God, even your God, has anointed you with the oil of joy above your fellows.

Now I entreat those mourners in Zion who discern the pitiful and lamentable plight to which we are come, to be in like manner moved and stirred up to make mention of her dismantled and ruined estate in the ear of a merciful and gracious God. Thus let them suffer for righteousness; and the Spirit of glory and of God shall rest upon them.

But, and if we, to whom the Lord has made known both the evil condition and hastening judgments of the Church, will only rail and rebuke without compassionating and grieving before God; then are we but discontented, querulous, malicious puritans, not holy, humble, and devoted Christians. And our judgment will be only the more severe, because, knowing the way of truth, we have turned from peace into contention. Therefore I do entreat all

those dear brethren who are now blowing the trumpet in the mount of the Lord, to remember that this office belonged to the Levites under the Law, and to the priests, who were holy unto the Lord. So ought we to be holy who make known the word of the Lord to the people concerning things to come.

Yea, and I am assured that whosoever will not clothe his spirit in sackcloth, while he prophesies of judgment to come, shall not prosper. It is reported of our Lord, that He was seldom if ever seen to smile; not that there was not joy and gladness in His heart, not that His word was not a word of joy, even the Gospel of salvation, but that withal, He was the bearer of heavy tidings to Jerusalem, and the tribes of Israel, unto whom He was sent. So we being Gospel-bearers, are yet also judgment-bearers to this generation. So ought we to be rather of a grave and sorrowful countenance, than of a merry and joyful mood. I desire for my own part, and pray to God that I might so carry myself in the sight and at the head of that Church over which I am set; and that I might write in the same spirit unto all to whom these records of my thoughts may come. For I myself desire one of these thrones of judgment, and shall seek to obtain it by a continual forgetfulness of the things which are behind, and reaching forward to the things which are before.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Philippians* 3:13.