

Overcoming

We are all aware of the emphasis that is laid on “*overcoming*,” in the apostolic writings. In his last message to men, Jesus plainly gave it to be understood that the blessings he brings with him at his second coming are for those only who “*overcome*.” Let us spend a moment this morning in trying to realise what this overcoming is, and in availing ourselves of the help to achieve it which God has given us.

Overcoming implies a fight: and fighting truly there is to be done. It is well to know the nature of the fight. It is half the battle to know your enemy and his movements. We cannot hope to overcome if we are ignorant where and against whom our efforts are to be directed. We need have no difficulty on this point. It is, unhappily, easier to know the enemy than to overcome him. It is not a foe we can fight with swords and guns, which were an easy war. It is a foe invisible and subtle. Our foe, taking him in the largest sense, is not error, without or within. False doctrine we shall doubtless always have to combat, while this probation lasts, and we must not shun our duty; but this is a comparatively easy battle. It is only a small part of the conflict that has to be waged over the whole field of life. In the largest form of the conflict, our whole minds are the battle ground, and the war is a war of ideas, which are the great force leading to action. One state of mind is natural to us. Another state of mind is that in which God finds pleasure. He has given us the means of generating this other state of mind; and victory consists in successfully establishing this state of mind in the place of that which is natural, and acting it out in life.

The one state of mind is apostolically styled the old man, and the other the new man. This style of description is appropriate, both racially and individually considered. In the history of mankind, that state of mind which is styled the old man is the ancient and original state of man in every country of whose beginning we have authentic record, while the new man is a novelty of comparative recent introduction on the scene where he appears. In the history of every individual, the old-man state of mind is first and natural, and, therefore, old—the new-man coming as a graft upon the old, when the power that creates him is brought to bear. The old man may be taken as expressing that state of mind which the human brain, left to its own resources, will generate, and the new man as that state of mind which is created as the result of the implanting of divine ideas. Nothing could be more express than Paul’s definitions on this point:

“The old man,” he says, *“is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts”*—(Eph. 4:22)—*“the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience, among whom we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind”* (2:2-3).

The new man, he says, *“is renewed in knowledge AFTER THE IMAGE OF HIM THAT CREATED HIM”* (Col. 3:10)

The putting on of the new man consists, he says, in *“being renewed in the spirit of the mind”* (Eph. 4:24). *“Created in righteousness and true holiness.”* Adam may be taken as the type of the old man, and Christ as the type of the new man. Literally, the new man in every case where he exists, is moral and intellectual conformity to the Lord Jesus Christ.

But we must not rest content with these metaphysical discriminations. It is for practical purposes we have met to consider the subject. It would not be profitable to merely look at the differing characteristics of these two states of mind, unless our considerations of the subject supplied us with some power to choose between them. That there is a power of choice is implied in Paul's exhortation to "*put off*" the old man, and to "*put on*" the new. It would be no use telling men to put off and put on if they could do neither one nor the other. We are liable tacitly to assume that our state of mind is as fixed and independent of our volition as the colour of our hair. Phrenology, wrongly applied, has helped to foster this mistake. There is just as large a margin for the development of the mind by special treatment as there is for the development of the body by special treatment. If you give in to sloth and inaction in physical life, the muscles will become flabby, and degeneration will, sooner or later, attack some of the vital tissues, where an enlightened discipline would preserve and increase vigour, form, and function. So with mind: if it is left uncultivated, native bias will obtain the ascendancy, whereas special culture will develop it in new forms and powers. This is proved every day in all departments of education and handicraft. A false philosophy of the human mind has obscured this obvious fact and wrought havoc in the practical application of the truth.

Now, the power that God has given us for the development of the mind in conformity with the model He has given us in Christ, is the truth concerning him in the form presented in all the Scriptures. Surely it is not necessary to prove this. All will assent to the well-known declaration of Paul that the Scriptures are given to thoroughly furnish the man of God, and that they ARE ABLE to make men wise unto salvation, and to cleanse them from the defilements natural to the old man in his unchecked evolution. The entire truth of the statement it perhaps takes a long time to see (when it is seen, it is seen with a completeness that inspires the most enthusiastic endorsement of David's statements on the subject). But faith helps us somewhat to take truth on trust, even when we do not see clearly, when its general grounds are manifest. The danger of miscarriage lies in the practical application. Men are content to agree theoretically that the Scriptures are God's ideas in writing with which it is our wisdom to impregnate our living brains; but are liable to belie their admission by leaving the Bible neglected and drinking at fountains of human inspiration.

Let us consider. Man lives but a short time. His liability is to be controlled by what he sees and feels, either in his own experience or in the experience of other men who feel like himself, and write their experiences, and with which experiences he consequently has a sympathy. Various forms of elegant literature become thus a power to rivet him in the fetters of his own impressions and feelings. Now it is quite certain that these impressions and feelings do not include God, or the history of what God has already done on the earth. They do not include the promises of God or His commandments. They do not include Christ or the purpose which God has declared He has in connection with Christ. None of these things are naturally within the circle of a human being's "impressions and feelings." They are matters of history and revelation which do not come naturally within the scope of these impressions and feelings. And not only so, but they relate to things that are too high to be interesting to them. Paul declares, and experience shows it to be true, that the natural mind "*is enmity against God: it is not subject to the law of God.*"

Here, then, is a war of which every human being becomes the subject, into whose mind the enlightenment of the truth enters. There is, of course, no war where the natural mind has undisputed sway: but where the truth of God enters, there is war. How will it end? This is the question. Here is where the overcoming has to be done. As in every other war, so here: victory is a question of measures. There are things to be avoided as imperilling victory: there are things to be cultivated as helping it. This is a maxim of common sense. It is expressly inculcated by Paul, who says—

“Every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things: now they (wrestlers in the public games) do it to obtain a corruptible crown: but we, an incorruptible” (1 Cor. 9:25).

*“They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition . . . but thou, O man of God, **flee these things**: and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith: lay hold on eternal life”* (1 Tim. 6:9-11).

On the other side of the question, we have him saying:

*“Meditate upon these things: **GIVE THYSELF WHOLLY TO THEM**”* (4:15).

On the question, “Is it worth while?” there are several remarks that cannot be too strongly made. The question savours of barbarism or insanity. The man’s judgment must be in a curious fog who could put God’s offered salvation into the scales with anything under the sun or over it. It is not a thing to be appraised. It is not a thing to be accepted at an estimate of value. It is an offer bearing on its front the rights of the offerer—the owner of all things—in a way that brings unutterable peril to the man who rejects it. The rights of God are little thought of by many who languidly hear of the kindness of God. The kindness of God is not for those who insult Him by a light estimate of His greatness, and who handle His offered mercy as a customer might handle a piece of merchandise to see if it is worth having. God is a terrible majesty, as the smallest effort of reason tells any man: He is to be had in extremest reverence of all who approach Him. Any other approach He will resent as a consuming fire. The whole Mosaic economy teaches this. The man who receives an invitation to become His son, and asks, “Is it worth while?” is in the act of *“treasuring up for himself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”*

Nevertheless, there is a valuation side. That is, the thing we are asked to give ourselves to is of value: but the value is *“unsearchable.”* It is beyond computation. It cannot be placed for a moment in comparison with anything to which it is possible for us now to be related as mortal men. To ask “Is it worth while?” is incalculably more unreasonable than a costermonger’s conduct would be who should hesitate to leave the sale of his cabbages on the street to go to a lawyer’s office to receive a legacy left him of 20,000 pounds. *“All things that thou could’st desire are not worthy to be compared”* with the great salvation which God makes sure to us on condition of faith and obedience, working by love. Christ’s parable of the man who discovered a rich hidden treasure, and sold all he had to acquire the property where the treasure lay, is the only fitting illustration of what is wise in the case. A man perceiving and

believing what Christ has offered to the sons of men, acts in the only reasonable way when he sets his whole heart and strains his utmost strength to attain to it. Who would not exchange a dying body for an immortal one? Who would not part with the weakness and inefficiency of mortal life for the angelic strength and perfection of the spiritual nature which the Lord now has, and which, in various beautiful apocalyptic figures, he offers to give to all who overcome? Who would not leave the present evil world, with all its corruptions, its debasements, its unmercifulnesses, its moral and intellectual hideousnesses, its unequal arrangements, its beastly immoralities and wasting ambitions, its degrading squalors and effeminating extravagances, —its cruel poverties, and distressing arrogances; its degrading ignorances and unblessed, pompous, shallow knowledges—for the Kingdom of God, with its purity, its power, its lofty noblenesses, its kindness, its unutterable beauties of character and condition, its thrice blessed arrangement of all men into one happy, prosperous family, under true nobles of immortal life and power—God over all, praised for ever? The man must lack eyes and heart who would falter.

But, beloved, ye are not without heart and eyes. Your presence at the table this morning is evidence of eyes open and heart charmed in some measure by the gospel of the Kingdom which has come to us from apostles and prophets. What we have to do is to confirm and build ourselves up in the resolution of this most holy faith, and to renew the war against the things that would obstruct our way to the Kingdom of God. Turn away your eyes from beholding vanity. It was David's prayer to God that he might be enabled to do this. It is what, therefore, it is our wisdom to do. Cultivate not acquaintance with the things that would take your heart from God. Avoid the books—decline the pleasures—abstain from the occupations—go far from the men that would draw you into sympathy with the present evil world. Let your search be in opposite directions. Open the door of your heart to the things that God has given for our purification and salvation. He has given you a book; make it your own in daily reading. He has written a history of His work on earth so far. Honour Him by mastering it, and keeping it in your memory. He has biographed His friends—the men in whom He is well pleased; furnish your inner man with their portraits and their lives. He has disclosed the surpassing glory of His Son, to whom He commands the submission of every human heart and tongue; fill your heart with it and bend before it, whatever others do. He has, at great length, indicated and unfolded the principles of His action, the maxims of His wisdom, the things among men which give Him pleasure; do Him the honour and yourself the advantage of opening your mind without stint to these.

You know how to do it. It is not possible at a single effort. As it has pleased God to constitute things, no results of value are in anything to be got at in a moment. "*Patient continuance*" in the line of wisdom is the principle of success. Thus the body grows: thus life develops: thus character forms: thus history unfolds: thus the ages roll. The man who goes to college cannot fill himself with knowledge at a gulp. The boy who goes to learn a trade does one stroke at a time. **Perseverance in the right line with a persistent abstention from the wrong line**—this is the secret of success in all things, and in nothing more than in godliness. Adopt the habit of daily reading the Bible by method, and never allow yourself to think you can in the present mortal state ever reach a time when you can dispense with it. In this, as in all other matters, "*endure unto the end.*" Listen to no counsel in disfavour of it. Suspect the man who advises you to be slack in it. Other reading and other occupation are of

course inevitable and necessary; but do not let these displace this.

Your persevering honour of God in the reading of His word will have its reward even now. You will find the battle become easier as the time rolls on. The inner man, enriched by the indwelling of the word, will assimilate to it, and become one with it, and find pleasure in that act of "*overcoming*" which at first was an effort—perhaps a painful one. The old man will sink pretty well withered to the ground, and the new man will stand over him stalwart and strong, master of the situation, and ready to draw sword against every encroachment of the foe. You will take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in distresses for Christ's sake, "*counting it all joy*" when things go against you on this behalf. If the outward man perish, the inward man renewed will uphold you day by day. The vision of the Kingdom of God will grow brighter before your mental eye as the time rolls on, and the gaudy glory of the world will wax fainter and fainter, while you "*look not at the things which are seen but at those things which are not seen, for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen, are eternal.*"

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