

The Nature and Function of Overcomers

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the nature and function of Overcomers, who are those who are in the freedom, power, freshness, and progress of resurrection life, and are God's vantage ground in a day of widespread spiritual declension and failure.

Scripture: Isaiah 1:9, Romans 9:27, Romans 11:2, Revelation 2:7, Revelation 12:11

Topics: "Overcoming", "Resurrection Life"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the nature and function of Overcomers, illustrating that they embody the fullness of God's intentions and purposes, which are realized through a vital union with Christ. He explains that Overcomers are characterized by their resurrection life, freedom from spiritual corruption, and their role as a remnant that signifies God's thoughts and purposes amidst spiritual decline. The sermon highlights that Overcomers are not merely individuals but a corporate body, called to retain excellence and serve as signs and wonders in a world of desolation. Ultimately, they are called to be God's instruments for the realization of His Kingdom, demonstrating the power of His resurrection and the hope of eternal life.

Transcript

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

"To him that overcometh..." (Rev. 2:7, etc).

"And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb, and because of the word of their testimony" (Rev. 12:11).

Our message is concerning Overcomer Testimony. We first of all passed our eye over the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation with a view to taking account of the fact of Overcomers in Scripture, then we spent much time on the nature and function of overcomers; we spoke of it in the first place negatively, what Overcomers are not - they do not stand related to anything partial; Overcomer Testimony embraces the whole counsel of God. Coming to this matter positively, we sought to see that God has vast, immense thoughts and intentions concerning His creation, far too great for our comprehension at any given time, far too great for any one or any small company of the Lord's people to comprehend even in eternity. It will take a vast multitude which no man can number to grow into the fulness of God's thoughts and purposes, and it will take the ages of the ages to express those thoughts in that great multitude. They are not just abstract ideas, but they have been embodied in His Son, and to know the thoughts and the purposes of

God is a matter of vital union with the Lord Jesus; to come under the hand of the Holy Spirit to be dealt with and to be taken through experience after experience in which it is absolutely necessary to our very life to make some new discovery of Christ. It is knowledge of Christ in life, in growth, on the principle of the Body, the principle of organic life, development by life. We said finally that fulness - and it is that for which Overcomers exist - is governed by two things. First, life and spirituality: Divine life constituting us spiritual people with spiritual minds, spiritual understanding, spiritual conceptions. Secondly, relatedness - fulness rests upon relatedness; there is no such thing as individual fulness in the thought of God, fulness is corporate, making necessary spiritual, vital, organic relationship between the Lord's people.

We proceed from that point. We just say in going on that the nature of Overcomers is that of those who are firstly in the freedom, power, freshness and progress of resurrection life. That will interpret the messages to the seven churches for you at once; that will explain Overcomers in all ages; those who are in the freedom, the power, the freshness, the progressiveness of resurrection life; for resurrection is emancipation, it is liberation. Resurrection is power, even "the exceeding greatness of his power... according to that working of the strength of his might which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead" (Eph. 1:19-20). Resurrection is freshness, it is a new beginning, it is a begetting again unto a living hope (1 Pet. 1:3). And resurrection is not something once for all; it is the beginning of an eternal expansion, continuous enlargement. That is the power of His resurrection, that is the life which is the inheritance and the birthright of the Lord's people, and Overcomers are to be the embodiment of that.

Secondly, Overcomers are, therefore, those who are held together by life. I think it wants but a very casual glance at spiritual history to see that Overcomer Testimony has been defeated by the disintegration of the Lord's people; their separations, their breakings up, their schisms, their divisions. It is all Satan's way of countering the testimony of Jesus. Overcomers are not those who go in for Christian unity and try to find some basis upon which they can be all agreed and stick to it as long as they can. No, it is something deeper than that; it is wrought in the power of an indestructible life, held together by life, so that the final emergence of an Overcomer company is one, a Man-child called 'they'. "She was delivered of a son, a man child"; "and they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb" - passing almost immediately from the singular to the plural about the same object; an organic whole.

Features of the Overcomer

Now let us get nearer to this thing. Come to the actual word; in the Old Testament you will have recognized that very largely the Overcomers are called a Remnant. We have read some passages in which that word appears. "Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant" (Isa. 1:9); "Though thy people Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them shall return" (Isa. 10:22). That is the Old Testament name, especially in the latter part of the Old Testament, for Overcomers. The New Testament word is Overcomers. Let us get back to this Old Testament word, because it is tremendously enlightening. I make no claims to be a Hebrew scholar, but a lexicon and a concordance are very useful things, and the Hebrew concordance is very enlightening on this word. There are at least five words employed for this general idea, but every word has its own aspect of an Overcomer. I want to give you just the sense of the five words.

1. Triumph over Corruption of Death

Firstly, there is the word for remnant which is in the sense of that which has escaped corruption, something which lives in spite of death; that which has escaped the corruption of death, and lives in spite

of death. You hardly need go further to get your idea of Overcomer. Is not that the very thing with which the book of the Revelation is introduced, and is not that introduction to the book of the Revelation the basis of the Divine appeal and challenge? "I am he that liveth; I became dead, but behold, I am alive unto the ages of the ages and have the keys of death and of Hades" (Rev. 1:18). And at the beginning of the Church's history when it as a whole was in the Overcomer position, the great proclamation by the witness concerning the Lord Jesus and His crucifixion, death and burial, was this - a quotation from the Old Testament - "It was not possible that he should be holden of death. For David said concerning him... Thou wilt not leave my soul in Hades, neither wilt thou give thy Holy One to see corruption" (Acts 2:24-27). Therefore God raised Him from the dead. "Thou wilt not leave my soul in Hades"; "and have the keys of death and Hades", complete mastery of death. "Thou wilt not suffer thy Holy One to see corruption", "He whom God raised up saw no corruption" (Acts 13:37) is the Apostle's testimony. And here is this Old Testament word used by the Holy Spirit for a Remnant which just simply means that escape from corruption, living in spite of death. The Adversary's great effort all the way through is to corrupt the people of God, and in bringing them into spiritual death to bring them to corruption spiritually, to disintegrate them by spiritual death, somehow; to reverse the testimony of Jesus in His Body, the Church, to contradict the great primal fact that death and corruption have been vanquished by Him fully and finally; first, spiritually in its principle, and finally physically in its outworking. The story of the book of the Revelation in its beginnings is of death and corruption in the churches. You have no need that I even mention those words, those statements, indicating death and corruption in the churches; and right into the midst of that the Lord says - "He that overcometh..." An Overcomer is one who escapes corruption and lives even though death is all around. It is a living people in the presence of spiritual death which is working amongst the Lord's people - I am not talking about the world - spiritual death, decline, break up, disintegration; yes, and corruption, mixture, false elements are abroad amongst Christians, and in the midst of it all the Lord is seeking that body, that company, which has escaped the corruption and lives triumphant over death. So much for the first of these five words.

2. Freedom from Slavery

There is another word which just means that which has escaped from slavery and is breathing free air. That is a fine picture, a fine portrait for Overcomers - that which has escaped from slavery and is breathing free air. I dare not stay to interpret that. Some of us, even in our Christian lives and histories, know what it is to escape from slavery. Oh, the old bondage of the Christian system and order, expectation and demand, all the old rota and legality! - to be free of it all! Not only to be raised with Christ, but to have the grave-clothes taken off and to be breathing the free air of the spiritually emancipated! That is what this word calls a remnant, and that is not something extra to Christianity. It is exactly what you find at the beginning with the Church. The Lord had cried in the midst of a burdened, tyrannised, religious nation - "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30). What is the old yoke, the old burden, which has harassed and worn these people so that they are weary to death, drawing out His compassionate appeal - "Come unto me, and I will give you rest"? It is the old yoke and burden of legalistic religion, 'thou shalt' and 'thou shalt not': 'you must' and 'you must not' - the whole system built up like that, a great burden. "They bind heavy burdens." He said "and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with their finger" (Matt. 23:4). And this word for remnant means such as have escaped slavery and are breathing the free air. You find them in the beginning of the book of the Acts. Overcomers are those who go back to the beginning in experience. They do not take up something

further which is deeper teaching, fuller light. It is the primal freshness and fulness of Christ that Overcomers represent - unfortunately, in contrast to the general situation.

3. The Retaining of Excellence

And the next word for remnant is that which is sometimes translated 'residue', in the sense of those who retain excellence in spite of deterioration. It very aptly describes Overcomers. Deterioration is almost universal; that does not need arguing, everyone will agree, it is not necessary to make out a case. There are very few people who, in their most honest hearts, are not very much concerned about the spiritual state of things. Overcomers are those who retain excellence over against deterioration. That is what the Lord wants and, because the Lord wants it, it is possible, and because He both wants it and makes it possible, if we will come the Lord's way, we can know it. This excellence, again, is not something added to Christianity. It was said of Israel that they were a chosen race - "Ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may shew forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Pet. 2:9), and the Overcomers are those who are fulfilling the original purpose of their calling - to show forth the excellence, retaining excellence today, when the general impression is anything but that of His excellencies.

4. The Finding of Refuge

The next word is that which is best translated, I think, into our English word with which we have become sadly familiar in recent days - a refugee; the essence of this word is that. It means one who has left a region of desolation and found refuge from desolation - a fine thought for Overcomers. It is possible to know spiritual desolation even amongst the people of God, to know desolation of heart even in the Christian Church. So many write to us and speak to us - 'The place where I attend is a desolation, there is no food, there is no life, it is all barren and dead; what are we to do?' And that is a Christian church, so called; a Christian circle. Yes, we say it quietly because we do not gloat over that; it is the opposite of that that is in our thought. We have to take note of facts, and these are facts, that there is spiritual desolation today in Christendom and often even in evangelical circles; starvation and death, and the Overcomer, the remnant, are those who have left that region of desolation spiritually and have found food, come into life, into wealth, into spiritual affluence, who have found the realm of heart satisfaction. That is how it was at the beginning.

5. Survival

Then, finally, there is the word for remnant which just means survivor and survival. The picture is that of one who has squeezed through a narrow opening into liberty, and who is alone left, but being alone left, is living and free, a survivor. We know all too much of the tragedy of that word in these days. The ships that have gone down, the lifeboats packed, one after another dying from exposure and starvation, and one left at last and rescued, a survivor perhaps of a whole ship or at least of a boat-load, having, so to speak, squeezed through the narrow opening between life and death, alone but living and free. It may take a little while to recover from the suffering; but the realization, - I am alive, they are all dead and I am alive and I am out, I have escaped, they have all perished! is a tremendous thing to such an individual; to be one who has squeezed through that narrow gate and is alive; of course it is a great responsibility, but all that is crowded into a single Hebrew word for remnant. I am not saying that any one of these words fully describes the Overcomer, but put them all together and you get the Overcomer. The final thing is - Out, survived, living and free! It is unto that that the Lord has called us, to realize something of the narrow

escape we have had, what a thing it is to be alive in the Lord. How many there are who do not know the life that we are enjoying. In this world we are survivors, living and free, and that, tragically enough, amongst many Christians who have been engulfed. We are defining the nature of Overcomers, and that is what it is.

Overcomers for Signs and for Wonders

Now let us pass on quite quickly for a few minutes. There came a point at which God broke with the nation, Israel, as a whole, and gave Himself up to the Remnant. We have read those words in Isa. 8 - "Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel". "I and the children whom God hath given me". First of all, see what that meant in the case of Israel and Isaiah the prophet. It meant that God had brought into being that little family, that little domestic circle, in such a way, and had preserved and maintained and succoured in such a way as to serve Him in this capacity of putting them right in the midst of Israel, to be firstly, for signs; that is, to signify something, to imply and indicate something about God and God's thought and mind concerning His people. There is a very great mistake being made just now of taking the Hebrew prophets and using them to the nation, the British nation and the nations. It is a mistake. You cannot put the British nation or any other nation in the place of Israel. The nation is the Lord's people, the holy nation, and it is to the holy nation that the prophets have their message and ministry, and it is through the holy nation that the nations are to be fed. Here the Lord broke with the whole nation, Israel, and gave Himself up to the Remnant, and that Remnant was to be like Isaiah and the children whom God had given him for signs, to signify in their own being, in their own constitution, in the way in which the Lord had brought them into being and had dealt with them, how the Lord was related to them, to signify what His thought was to all His people. That is the function of a remnant. "And for wonders in Israel", and, dear friends, you cannot have the background of wonders without being put into the position where it wants a wonder to bring you out on top so that you say, It is a wonder I am alive, it is a wonder that I survived that I got through, that I am where I am today; only God could have done it! And that is what the Remnant is for - to show what a wonderful God He is in our experience. That is not something extra, that is basic. "The exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe according to that working of the strength of his might which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead". The greatest wonder of all is the resurrection of Christ; and the maintaining of a people in resurrection life in a world like this and in the midst of the awful forces of evil which are set for their undoing and setting aside. In life - yes, in life, not in existence but in life, and the maintaining of life in any measure of fulness and victory is a wonder. The Lord wants to get hold of a people who will serve Him in this capacity as signs, signifying His mind in their own being, their own history, an example of what the Lord wants for all His people.

But do not forget, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews lays hold of that fragment in Isa. 8 and he brings it in in the second chapter. "Since then the children are sharers in flesh and blood, he also himself in like manner partook of the same". The quotation comes right in in that connection. "Behold, I and the children which God hath given me". "Both he that sanctifieth and they that are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying... Behold, I and the children which God hath given me". That is a basic and original idea, that union with Christ basically and subsequently, not at an advanced point, but union with Christ is supposed to have this very element and nature. "I and the children whom God hath given me are for signs and for wonders". Our very union with Christ is supposed to be a wonder and a signification right at its beginning. To recover that is the work of Overcomers. We are on the function now. You see, the Remnant and Overcomers have as their function to be God's vantage ground

in a day of widespread spiritual declension and failure, to be vantage points, that upon which God can act and say, not, This is my idea for you, but, Here is my thought positively expressed, here is the thing that I am after! That is the function of Overcomers, to be to God like that. "I and the children whom God hath given me are for signs and for wonders". Here is the thing, God is saying. Look at this, look at Isaiah and his children, look at Christ and His own as God wills them to be and you have what I am after, what my mind is! The remnant is for that, God's vantage ground in a day of declension to show the thing to others.

The Overcomer Remnant in Relation to the Whole

That is not all, by a long way. May I just say this one more word before I conclude this part. There is an allusion in the original statement and in its citation in Romans. "Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, we should have been like unto Gomorrah". There is an allusion there. The allusion is to Abraham, and it brings right into view that scene, that marvellous scene, of Abraham challenging and arguing with and persuading God, and God lending Himself to the challenge and listening to the argument and yielding to the persuasion. If there are fifty righteous, will you not destroy? And the Lord says, If I can find fifty righteous, I will spare the place for their sakes. He cannot find fifty righteous, and Abraham gradually reduces it and God yields to him every time. If I can find ten righteous, will you spare the cities? Yes, if you find ten. And he went and you may be sure he scoured the cities thoroughly to find ten righteous people. He had to come back and say, I cannot find any. God says, If only you could have found a remnant, I would have saved the whole. That is the argument of Isaiah and of Paul, and that is why I brought together those two passages: "Even now there is a remnant." 'Therefore shall all Israel be saved': the vocational aspect of being an Overcomer. It is not just for ourselves to get the extra glory and blessing. It is related to the service of God, serving God and serving Him in respect of all His people. Now, that is something that wants enlarging upon. I can see now something in those words "And his servants shall serve him and they shall see his face" (Rev. 22:3-4). Is that everybody? No.

God's thought concerning His Church is that it should be gathered out of the nations, slowly but surely formed into a bride worthy of giving to His Son as a gift, without spot or blemish or any such thing; given to Christ as His bride to be for Him the instrument, the agency of filling and fulfilling the coming Kingdom throughout the ages. That is God's thought about the Church. Can we say that that is being realised in any commensurate way? No, but God holds to His thought and He seeks an inner company whom we are calling a remnant or an Overcomer company to stand for Him in this service, to be a link between Him and His full thought in His people, and to be that instrument for the realisation of His full thought, to serve Him, to see His face. What is that? - to be to His Son the agency of filling the Kingdom and fulfilling the Kingdom in the days to come. That is tremendous service. It is unto that that the Overcomers are called. If you want to be in the work of the Lord, if you want to be the Lord's servants, it is not given to a special class called ministers and missionaries. It is to a whole company, to every one who overcomes. "He that overcometh, I will give to him to sit down with me in my throne" (Rev. 3:21); "will I give to eat of the tree of life" (Rev. 2:7). These are all things symbolic of that full thought of God concerning His Church, gathered up and expressed firstly in Overcomers.

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