

FINISHING THE CAMPAIGN
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“Finishing the Campaign”—that is what the Book of Revelation is all about. Ambrose Bierce, in his work entitled *The Devil’s Dictionary* (1947), gives this tongue-in-cheek definition: “REVELATION, n. A famous book in which St. John the Divine concealed all that he knew. The revealing is done by the commentators, who know nothing.” While it may be true that the commentators reveal little, it is not true that John concealed all that he knew. In fact, John pronounces a blessing on those who understand and who undertake what he has written. “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near” (Rev 1:3).¹

The Book of Revelation is an apocalyptic book of prophecy written in the form of a letter. This letter was authored by the Apostle John sometime during the last third of the first Christian century. It was written to seven churches in Asia Minor—modern-day western Turkey.

Years ago there was a *Peanuts* cartoon in which Lucy asked Charlie Brown what he was reading. He said that he was reading the Bible, the letters of Paul, and Lucy replied that she made it a habit never to read other people’s mail. Revelation includes one brief section specifically aimed at each of the seven churches of Asia Minor, so that in effect John is allowing—even compelling—these churches to read each other’s mail!

Anyone who has studied the messages to the seven churches knows that these congregations were not unlike Christian congregations today. This is true whether we are talking about the situations they faced or the manner in which they faced those situations. Persecution was a possibility—although probably not yet a reality—for three of the congregations: Smyrna, Pergamum, and Philadelphia. However, divisions and false teaching *within* the church seem to have posed a more serious threat at Pergamum and Thyatira, and the worst threat of all was complacency—especially at Ephesus, Sardis, and

¹Scripture quotations are taken from the NRSV.

Laodicea. *John's letter is a wake-up call to Christians who do not sense that they are in any particular danger.*

Each of the messages to the seven churches proclaims a promise to those who faithfully finish the campaign. It is to these promises that we will now turn our attention.

Rev 2:1⁶“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands: . . . ⁷Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. *To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.*”

The Book of Genesis speaks of a “tree of life” in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:9) that, after the “original sin” of the original couple, was guarded by a flaming sword so that Adam and Eve could not eat of its fruit and gain immortality (Gen 3:22-24). In Jewish apocalyptic literature, the “tree of life” exists as a reward for the righteous following judgment (1 Enoch 24:4-25:6; Testament of Levi 18:11; cf. also 2 Esdras 8:52; 2 Enoch 8:3). In Rev 22:2, the “tree of life” produces its perennial fruit in the heavenly Jerusalem. Even apart from scripture, the Ephesian Christians would find such an image familiar due both to the traditional royal gardens in Asia and the garden estates of the cult of Artemis. In the worship of Artemis, there were tree-shrines that served as a place of asylum. It is possible that the concepts of “tree” and “paradise” may also convey the ideas of the cross of Christ and the fact that the cross was the place of refuge for the repentant sinner. The term “paradise” was originally a Persian word for “pleasure garden.” In later Judaism, it was used to depict the dwelling place of the righteous dead. The “paradise of God” in the Book of Revelation symbolizes the final state in which God and people are restored to that perfect fellowship which existed before the entrance of sin into the world. *“To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.”*

Rev 2:8⁶“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life: . . . ¹⁰*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.* ¹¹Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. *Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.*”

The reward for faithfulness is “the crown of life,” which means the crown that is life itself. In addition to being a prize for athletic achievements, the crown was also a symbol

of honor awarded for civil service or for military accomplishments. Furthermore, the crown may be an allusion to Smyrna's physical appearance, suggested by the circle of colonnaded buildings on the crest of Mt. Pagus called "the crown of Smyrna." But there is more. In the New Testament, the Greek word *parousia* (παρουσία) often refers to the coming of Christ; or as we tend to say, the Second Coming of Christ. This word was also the official term for the coming of a person of high rank, especially of kings and emperors visiting a province. At the official visit of a human ruler, it was the custom to present him a crown as a token of allegiance. Unlike earthly sovereigns who expected to receive a crown at their coming, Christ will Himself give a crown to those who have continued faithful to the end. When Christ comes, instead of demanding a crown from His people, He will deliver a crown to His people! And those who receive "the crown of life" will be protected from "the second death." "The second death" was a Jewish rabbinic phrase for the annihilation of the wicked in the next world. *"Be faithful even to the point death, and I will give you the crown of life. . . . Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death."*

Rev 2:12¹⁶ "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword: . . . ¹⁷Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. *To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.*"

According to Jewish tradition, the pot of manna that was placed in the ark of the covenant (Exod 16:32-34; cf. Heb 9:4) was taken by Jeremiah at the time of the destruction of Solomon's temple (sixth century B.C.) and hidden underground in Mt. Nebo (2 Macc 2:4-7). There it was to remain until the coming of the Messiah when Jeremiah would reappear and return the ark and its contents to the new messianic temple in Jerusalem. There are perhaps a dozen or more plausible interpretations of the "white stone," and it seems likely that no single explanation is adequate because John deliberately alludes to a diverse background. With that in mind, I would suggest that a possible prevailing concept is that the white stone is a token (Latin: *tessera*)—or, as we would say, a ticket—for admission to the messianic banquet of Jesus Christ. The nature of the "new name" written on the white stone is not so easy to determine. Is this the new name of Christ—as in Rev 3:12—or of the individual Christian? I tend to agree with those who

see a reference to Isaiah (Isa 56:5 and especially Isa 62:2), who promises that God will give His people a new name: a new name appropriate for the new Jerusalem and the new creation (Isa 65:15-19). The new name is the Christian's name and it symbolizes a new identity, a new status, and a new life. I must confess, there are a host of illustrious and impressive worldly events to which I wish someone would give me a ticket. But there is one ticket I want more than any other: a ticket with my name on it for admission to the banquet feast of the Lamb of God in the New Jerusalem. *"To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it."*

Rev 2:18⁴⁴ And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze: . . . ²⁶*To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end,*
I will give authority over the nations;
²⁷*to rule them with an iron rod,*
as when clay pots are shattered—
²⁸*even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star.* ²⁹Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

Using language from the second Psalm, the victorious Christ promises to the victors at Thyatira that they will share with Him in His triumphant reign. He also promises "the morning star." No completely satisfying solution for this symbol has been offered. The suggestion that seems most satisfying is that we have here an allusion to the promised star of Num 24:17, which many ancient Jews understood to be the Messiah. In Rev 22:16, Christ is explicitly called "the bright morning star." The promise, then, is that the faithful will receive the approval of Jesus Christ Himself on the Day of Judgment and they will share in His triumphant reign. *"To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, / I will give authority over the nations; / to rule them with an iron rod, / as when clay pots are shattered— / even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star."*

Rev 3:1⁴⁴ And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: . . . ⁴Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵*If you conquer, you will be clothed like*

them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. ⁶Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

In the Old Testament, Zechariah is depicted as wearing dirty clothes while standing before the angel of the Lord (Zech 3:1-5). The filthy garments represent the sins of both the priest and the people, and the removal of such clothing represents the removal of guilt. Furthermore, the saints in Sardis were aware of the fact that in the temples of Asia and elsewhere, worshipers dared not approach deities with soiled clothes; the normal apparel for approaching the gods in temples was white or linen. In Rev 7, the great multitude wearing white robes is led by the Lamb to springs of living water; and in chapter 14, the 144,000 “follow the Lamb wherever He goes.” Interestingly, Roman citizens wore a pure white toga at holidays and religious ceremonies, but especially at a victory celebration. In 2 Corinthians (2 Cor 2:14-16) and in Colossians (Col 2:15), the Apostle Paul uses the imagery of the Roman victory march—the picture of the white-clad attendants of the conqueror walking in his triumphal procession. At Sardis, most of the Christians were unprepared for the coming of their King. But when the conquering Christ would come, the waiting few are promised that they will walk with Him in His triumphal procession. The second promise to the faithful few is that their names will not be blotted out of the book of life. The idea of a divine ledger is first mentioned in Exodus (Exod 32:32-22), where Moses prays that if God will not forgive the sin of Israel, then Moses himself wants to be blotted out “of the book you [Yahweh] have written” (cf. Ps 69:28; Dan 12:1). And so, in the Old Testament, the book of life was a register of all those who held citizenship in the community of Israel. Such an idea was also common in the secular world. In Asia Minor, when a criminal’s name was removed from the civic register of a city, the individual lost their citizenship. In some places—and we have the best documentation from Athens—whenever any citizen was sentenced to be executed for a crime, their name was first erased from the register of citizens. The final promise to the overcomers in Sardis is that Jesus Himself will confess the faithful remnant before His father. At the final judgment before the throne of God (see Rev 20:11), the confession or the denial by the conquering Christ will be decisive. The promise that those who persevere will not be blotted from the book of life offers a serious warning to many Christians who depend purely on a past profession of faith to ensure their salvation.

Some Christians believe that their reputation of a glorious past will compensate for the reality of a gloomy present. Far too many assume that at the time of their baptism, their “ticket was punched” and they are bound for heaven. What a shock it must be to learn that one’s name *can* be removed from the passenger list. *“If you conquer, you will be clothed . . . in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels.”*

^{Rev 3:7}“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of the holy one, the true one,
who has the key of David,
who opens and no one will shut,
who shuts and no one opens: . . .

¹²*If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.* ¹³Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

The “coming” of Christ to Ephesus, Pergamum, and Sardis posed a threat to each church. At Ephesus the lampstand would be removed unless they repented; at Pergamum Christ would fight against them with the sword of His mouth; at Sardis He would come like a thief. But the “coming” to Philadelphia is different: it will bring to an end their time of trial and will establish them as permanent citizens of the eternal Kingdom of God. To those who overcome—those who hold on to what they have—is given the promise of being made pillars in the temple of God. To a city whose citizens lived in such fear of earthquakes that many had fled into the countryside to establish temporary dwellings, the promise of permanence within the New Jerusalem would have a special meaning. A further promise to the overcomers is that Christ will write on them the name of His God, the name of God’s city, and His own new name. This threefold inscription shows that the faithful belong to God, they hold citizenship in the New Jerusalem, and they are in a unique way related to Christ. The Old Testament background for such an inscription is probably Exod 28:36-38 where we learn that Aaron, the high priest, wore on his forehead a golden plate with the engraving “Holy to the LORD.” Furthermore, in the ancient world when a man became a king, or when he became a claimant to a kingdom, the first thing he often did was to issue coins with his name stamped on them. Coinage was the

sign of kingship; and the name was the sign of ownership. As Christians, you and I are like the coins of God: God's name of kingship and ownership should be stamped on us. Our lives should be such that when others see us they know that we are the property of God. *"If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name."*

Rev 3:14⁴ And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation: . . . ²⁰Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. ²¹*To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.* ²²Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

In Holman Hunt's famous picture *The Light of the World*, Christ is outside the door and knocking. When Hunt drew this portrait of Christ knocking at the door of the human heart, he was right when he pictured that door with no handle on the outside, for the door of the human heart must always be opened from within. To the conquering Christians of Laodicea, Christ promises, *"I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne."* All seating in Heaven is "reserved seating." Do you have a reservation?

"Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." Here for the seventh and last time we hear the exhortation to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. We are reminded that the messages to the seven churches of Asia Minor are at the same time a comprehensive message to the church universal throughout time. We—yes, you and I living in the twenty-first century—we must heed the warnings about the dangers of losing our first love (Ephesus), fear of suffering (Smyrna), doctrinal compromise (Pergamum), moral compromise (Thyatira), spiritual deadness (Sardis), failure to hold on (Philadelphia), and lukewarmness (Laodicea).

From the *War of the Worlds* (1898) by H. G. Wells to the blockbuster movie *Independence Day* (1996), we are familiar with stories in which the earth fights for survival against an enemy from another world. These cosmic conflicts are cast in clear-cut categories: there are only two sides, there is no neutral ground. Furthermore, it is not

hard to distinguish the bad guys from the good guys. And, early in the story you are fairly certain of who is going to win, even if you do not know how it will happen. The Book of Revelation tells the tale of a war of the worlds: a war that breaks out in heaven only to be fought finally on earth. There are only two sides: God versus Satan. God is good, Satan is bad, and that is not hard to see. Even before we hear this story, we are fairly certain of who is going to win.

The call of Revelation to all who read it or hear it is *to conquer*. The book demands our active participation in the divine war against evil. Everything else that is said in the seven messages to the churches has this purpose, expressed in the promise to the conquerors that concludes each message. These promises find their climatic fulfillment in Rev 21:7— *“Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.”* It is only by conquering—it is only by finishing the campaign—that the members of the churches may enter the New Jerusalem (cf. Rev 22:14). The visions that intervene between the seven messages to the churches and the final vision of the New Jerusalem are to enable the readers to move from one to the other, to understand what conquering involves.

We, those of us who claim to be Christians, are soldiers in the army of the Lamb. We were not drafted; we enlisted by our own free choice. And now, we are marching to the New Jerusalem and there are enemies that stand in our way. If we are to reach our destination, we must do so by conquering. But conquering is not so simple. The beast “was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them” (Rev 13:7; anticipated in Rev 11:7). The point is not that the beast and the Christians each win some victories; rather, the point is that the same event—the martyrdom of Christians (Christians who are faithful even to the point of death)—is described both as the beast’s victory over them and as their victory over the beast. In this way John poses the question: *Who are the real victors?* The answer depends on whether we see things from the earthly perspective of those who worship the beast or from the heavenly perspective that John’s visions open up for us. To the followers of the beast, it is obvious that the beast has defeated the martyrs (Rev 13:8). Even Christians must have been tempted to see it that way. They were a tiny minority of powerless people up against the overwhelming might of the state and the overwhelming pressure of pagan society. What was the point of resisting the beast when

he was proving irresistible? But John's message is that from the heavenly perspective things look quite different. The martyrs are the real victors. *To be faithful in witness to the true God even to the point of death is not to become a victim of the beast, but it is to take the field against the beast and win.* But only in a vision of heaven (Rev 7:9-14; 15:2-3) or a voice from heaven (Rev 11:12; 14:2) can the martyrs be *recognized* as victors. The perspective of heaven must break into the earth-bound delusion of the beast's propaganda to enable a different assessment of the same empirical fact: *the beast's apparent victory is the martyr's—and therefore God's—real victory.* Furthermore, the victorious death of the saints becomes a vital and vibrant witness to the nations—a witness that is God's instrument for the evangelization of the nations (Rev 11:1-13).

^{Rev 19:11} I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. ¹²His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. ¹³He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. ¹⁴The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. ¹⁵Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. ¹⁶On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

In A.D. 156, the Jews of Smyrna were responsible for one of the most famous martyrdoms in history. It was a festival day, and the cry went up to seize Polycarp the Christian bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp was given the choice: worship Caesar or die. The Jews led the shouts of the mob: "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of the gods, who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor to worship." Again, he was given the choice: sacrifice to Caesar or be burned. He gave his immortal answer: "Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" Although it was the Sabbath day, the Jews gathered fuel for the fire. As the flames licked his body, he prayed his great prayer: "I thank Thee that Thou hast graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of Thy Christ." And so Polycarp fought the good fight, finished the campaign, and was victorious just as Jesus Christ was victorious. By being faithful to death, Polycarp received the crown of life.

Live to die or die to live (live only to die or die in order to live)—those were the two choices facing the Christians to whom Jesus spoke through John. Live to die or die to live—these are the same two choices facing us today. It is my prayer that we will listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. *“To the one who conquers I [Jesus Christ] will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.”* Amen.