

Church of God, The Eternal

P. O. Box 775
Eugene, Oregon 97440
www.cogeternal.org

The late Raymond C. Cole
Founding Pastor
Jon W. Brisby
Pastor, Director

Offices in:
United States
Philippines
Switzerland

To Overcome Self—Our Spiritual Priority

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Dear Brethren:

As the Passover and days of Unleavened Bread draw near once again, it seems appropriate to address a particular spiritual principle befitting this Holy Day season. Jesus Christ is the foundation of our calling. Through the keeping of Passover each year we renew our commitment to recognize Christ as the only standard of Truth—that singular yardstick by which we must measure true righteousness. "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). The days of Unleavened Bread depict the need to overcome the natural carnal mind which God intentionally placed within us from birth. We must crucify the self daily as we put leavening out of our lives, putting on more of the perfect character of Christ—the personification of that unleavened bread—as we strive to become ever more like Him. "Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The true calling of a Christian therefore is one of overcoming. It is not the person who is most intellectual, the most articulate or charismatic, the most scholarly, or the most intuitive in deciphering hidden prophetic meanings from the Scriptures that will inherit eternal life. No, it is the *overcomer* who shall be given that priceless gift of Sonship in the Family of God.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God (Revelation 2:7).

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death (Revelation 2:11).

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it (Revelation 2:17).

And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star (Revelation 2:26–28).

He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels (Revelation 3:5).

Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name (Revelation 3:12).

To him that overcometh 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 (Revelation 3:21).

These are the messages Jesus Christ recorded for the seven churches of Asia Minor which were preserved specifically as a warning for all of God's people in these last days. Can there be any doubt how God intends we spend our time in preparation for the return of His Son? This most critical Christian mission is emphasized again at the end of the revelation God gave through the Apostle John. "And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. *He that overcometh* shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son" (Revelation 21:6–7) [emphasis ours].

If the primary mission of a true Christian is to overcome, what is it we are admonished to conquer? Those specific warnings to the churches in Revelation,

chapters two and three, describe the weaknesses of flesh and the corrupted thinking that can so easily envelop God's people. It is the carnal mind we all possess that is the greatest threat to our salvation. It is that very same rebellious mind of Satan the devil as manifested in this wretched world. "For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:4–5).

Yes, it requires the knowledge of Jesus Christ and the legitimate belief of that Truth which He personifies as the Word made flesh. This is our key to salvation. That is why God's new year begins with the keeping of Passover. We must recognize the one and only true Christ as distinguished from all imposters, embrace the unalterable truths of His perfect laws, statutes, and judgements—making them our personal compass for living—and then set about the lifelong task of discarding our own despicable orientation, allowing Jesus Christ to live more fully within us with each passing year.

Spiritual Distractions

Many of God's firstfruits have allowed themselves to become distracted from the critical spiritual mission of overcoming. How much easier it is to feel contented in serving God by focusing on other "spiritual" pursuits. Many have turned to "good works" in the service of God, but at the expense of their most important responsibility. Some have decided it is God's work of love to visit the elderly and sick, but cannot seem to muster the faith to attend commanded assemblies on the Sabbath and Holy Days. They volunteer their time in acts of personal service, but reject the original revelation of doctrine we received from Jesus Christ through His chosen servant of the last days. Still others commit their energies to hours of Bible study, not for the purpose of personal self-examination, but either to appear learned or else to discover some new revelation about last-day events. But why, for example, would God honor our fastings and prayers while we continue living in adulterous relationships, or perhaps keeping a corrupted day for Pentecost? Why would He honor our gifts to the poor while we continue robbing Him of tithes and offerings? Or why would He give us credit for comforting the sick while we ourselves refuse to trust Him for healing, or else fail to create peace by bridling the tongue?

It is not enough just to stay busy in any spiritual initiative of choice. We must focus our energies on the *correct priority* of spiritual pursuits. Someone will stand in the day of judgment and be dismayed that their many "good works" are not respected

by Christ at all. "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matthew 7:22–23). Why are these called ones condemned in spite of their visible efforts to serve? It is because they are still deemed by God as those who *work iniquity*. Iniquity is sin, and sin is the transgression of God's perfect laws (1 John 3:4). It is clear therefore that these who certainly have been busy and aggressive in certain spiritual pursuits nonetheless were not focused on what God requires most—overcoming sin and putting out spiritual leavening!

Overcoming—a Painful Process

How easily we can become distracted from our primary spiritual mission. How and why? Because it is painful to work on personal overcoming! It is difficult to break bad habits and make legitimate changes in our personal behaviors. It is excruciating to face up to flaws in our character and admit we need to change. The flesh cries out for justification, and truly crucifying that carnal nature is the greatest battle we will ever wage.

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do (Hebrews 4:12–13).

When we use God's word as a tool for self-examination and self-mastery, then we are engaged in the real work of a Christian—overcoming. When we focus on other "spiritual" pursuits *instead* of personal mastery, we create a false sense of righteousness and closeness with God, which becomes nothing more than a trap of self-deception. Jesus Christ spared no words in condemning the Pharisees for focusing on the outward appearances of righteousness, while sacrificing the true requirements of the law:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone (Matthew 23:23).

Oh yes, the Pharisees certainly were engaged in a work for God, but they distracted themselves with endeavors that were more appealing to the carnal mind, providing an outward display of their accomplishments. In some cases, it was not that their pursuits were in opposition to God's law (tithing the increase of small plants and herbs), but they were doing these things *to the exclusion* of the *weightier matters* of the law! What were those weightier matters of obligation? Judgment, mercy, and faith! Judgment of others? Never. Then judgment of whom? The self!

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?

Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye (Matthew 7:1–5).

If we are truly honest with ourselves, we come to recognize we have a full-time job in mastering the self. But we very easily forget that fact. It is easy for any of us to begin to think we can help God's work by spotting sin in the lives of others within the church. As our natural minds reason, is it not just as valuable to help purge sin out of the church when we see it, than to purge out a hidden sin in our own lives? How many inadvertently have turned their focus to the sins of others, believing deep down inside they are doing God's service in keeping the church "pure." But God never commanded us to expose the sins of others. The consistent admonition is to help those who are weak, and cover the sins of our brethren. "But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer. And above all things have fervent [love] among yourselves: for [love] shall cover the multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:7–8). "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Galatians 6:1). Yes, focusing on the sins of others is just one more diversionary path we might be tempted to take, instead of rolling up our sleeves and getting to the painful, but necessary, business of personal overcoming.

Majoring in Minors

In the business world it is commonly recognized that a serious impediment to productivity can be a syndrome called "majoring in minors." It describes the environment in which an employee may appear very busy most of the time, but yet never seems to accomplish the critical tasks of his/her job. Unless responsibilities are well prioritized, some employees will find ways to avoid working on critical tasks, in favor of activity that is more fun or less demanding. Therefore, a classic work management model includes separating each job duty into one of three classifications: "must do," "should do," and "nice to do." Employees are then trained to prioritize their time to focus first on critical "must do" items before ever working on "should do" or "nice to do" tasks. The same work model can apply equally as well in our spiritual lives.

Are we truly focusing on the "must do" tasks of overcoming, or are we filling most of our time in other spiritual arenas that make us feel good, but provide little fruit of the mind of Jesus Christ actually growing within us? The mind of Christ cannot increase within us if we have not made room by proportionally decreasing our natural, carnal mind. We must root out the carnal mind before Christ can fully take up His abode within us. This means we must be committed to the torturous, lifelong work of self-crucifixion. "And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts" (Galatians 5:24).

Of what are we each guilty, which must be purged?

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19–21).

We must first come to recognize that these very traits do indeed dwell within us, because we are all flesh, and these are the works of those natural natures God gave to us. If we cannot admit our true despicable state and guilt before God, we are not even at the starting gate in the overcoming process. This is why we must use the Word of God—that two-edged sword—to examine ourselves against the perfect stature of Jesus Christ. Evaluating where we truly stand at this moment is the first critical step, and why it is so absolutely imperative for a proper keeping of Passover.

Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged (1 Corinthians 11:27–31).

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (1 John 1:8–10).

Endurance Required

Because the task of fighting natural impulses is so difficult, it is very easy to become discouraged. The Apostle Paul masterfully described the war within our members between what we know is right, and what our carnal natures compel us to do:

For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? (Romans 7:14–24).

Knowing this is the very struggle we all experience, how can we hope to make progress in overcoming? We must cry out for more of God's Holy Spirit, and be committed to staying the course!

But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you (Romans 8:9–11).

It requires consistent effort on our part. If we are struggling against weaknesses we have not been able to master, we need to cry out all the more, not only for the power, but the *will* to keep fighting. "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you *both to will and to do* of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12–13) [emphasis ours]. Those who truly love God and the glorious opportunity for salvation He has offered, will keep that goal uppermost in mind and resist the temptation to give up. "And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Galatians 6:9).

Spiritual Procrastination

At some point we must stop putting off the difficult necessities we may have been avoiding. Just as we can often find ourselves putting off physical tasks we know need to be done, so we can wind up in a state of spiritual procrastination as well. In this case, it is not that we do not recognize that a change needs to be made, but we may dread the requirements needed to fully comply with God's law. This is where faith is absolutely essential. Faith is not just a spiritual platitude we speak about in nondescript terms. Real faith is the driving force behind the fruit of legitimate overcoming. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). If we have delayed making certain needed changes in our lives because of fear, we need to ask God for the strength to trust Him, and then step out strongly, believing He will sustain us for our obedience. "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him" (Job 13:15).

In some cases we might delay taking action in purging out sin by convincing ourselves it is all in God's hands. Our minds can be very deceitful. For example, someone newly called who first becomes aware of the requirement of Sabbath-keeping will often face a trial with their employment. If one has been working on the weekly

Sabbath until that time, how can a change be made to begin obeying God's law? How can one also begin taking off for the annual Holy Days as God requires? The natural mind will often reason that since God knows we cannot afford to lose our only income, we will keep working on the Sabbath until God provides a solution. This thinking highlights the fallacy of shifting our responsibility to God, or in other words, passing the buck. God made His command very clear. We are to obey Him unconditionally—in faith! We are never permitted to continue in sin, insisting that God take some action before we comply. This is what the principle of faith is all about. Is it possible we are harboring certain sins in our lives, waiting for God to make the first move, when all along He is waiting for *us* to act in faith? If we are truly humble before God and earnestly seek to know His will, He will show us what we need to do.

Taking God's Mercy for Granted

We might also avoid taking aggressive action to purge out spiritual leavening because we do not feel there is an immediate penalty involved. Perhaps we have been getting along fairly well—at least on the surface—in spite of the fact we know we have been committing sin. But what if God mercifully has been granting us time for repentance, and we actually have been wasting that reprieve? It is certainly true human beings become more motivated to change when we lose something of significant value. It is also true that if the immediate penalty is not too severe, we can often be enticed to continue breaking the law. For example, what about the area of diet? In spite of the fact we know certain products are harmful to our bodies over the long run (processed sugar, white flour, carbonated beverages, chemical additives, etc.), how easily do we become enticed nonetheless, rationalizing that the immediate gratification to the senses is worth the price? But is diet the only area of our lives where we may have been making such compromises? Can we recognize that even if the full effect of some penalties might be delayed, there is always eventual suffering for breaking God's immutable commands? What if we are taking for granted God's longsuffering and squandering the time He has afforded for repentance? Sooner or later, the piper has to be paid. God never makes empty threats. If God commanded us to do something or avoid doing something, rest assured there are serious consequences for disobedience.

And, behold, this day I am going the way of all the earth: and ye know in all your hearts and in all your souls, that not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the LORD your God spake concerning you; all are come to pass unto you, and not one thing hath failed thereof. Therefore it shall

come to pass, that as all good things are come upon you, which the LORD your God promised you; so shall the LORD bring upon you all evil things, until he have destroyed you from off this good land which the LORD your God hath given you. When ye have transgressed the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and have gone and served other gods, and bowed yourselves to them; then shall the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and ye shall perish quickly from off the good land which he hath given unto you (Joshua 23:14–16).

God's Dealings With Israel—Our Example

God was incredibly merciful and longsuffering to Israel. He gave them many opportunities to repent and turn to Him.

Thou camest down also upon mount Sinai, and spakest with them from heaven, and gavest them right judgments, and true laws, good statutes and commandments: And madest known unto them thy holy sabbath, and commandedst them precepts, statutes, and laws, by the hand of Moses thy servant: And gavest them bread from heaven for their hunger, and broughtest forth water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and promisedst them that they should go in to possess the land which thou hadst sworn to give them. But they and our fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their necks, and hearkened not to thy commandments, And refused to obey, neither were mindful of thy wonders that thou didst among them; but hardened their necks, and in their rebellion appointed a captain to return to their bondage: but thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not. . . . Thou gavest also thy good spirit to instruct them, and withheldest not thy manna from their mouth, and gavest them water for their thirst. Yea, forty years didst thou sustain them in the wilderness, so that they lacked nothing; their clothes waxed not old, and their feet swelled not. . . . So the children went in and possessed the land, and thou subduedst before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gavest them into their hands, with their kings, and the people of the land, that they might do with them as they would. . . . But after they had rest, they did evil again before thee: therefore leftest thou them in the hand of their enemies, so that they had the dominion over them: yet when they returned, and cried unto thee,

thou heardest them from heaven; and many times didst thou deliver them according to thy mercies (Nehemiah 9:13–17, 20–21, 24, 28).

Yes, in spite of Israel's repeated faithlessness, God granted them mercy and longsuffering, and continued to work patiently with them as beloved children. But ultimately, when they became so hardened and refused to repent and turn to Him, He allowed them to pay the ultimate price for their disobedience. Those lessons were written for all of us today—God's spiritual Israel—the Church.

But with whom was he grieved forty years? was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness? And to whom swore he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief. Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it (Hebrews 3:17–19, 4:1–2).

In the end, those whom God brought through the wilderness—who failed to be obedient and trust Him—died, never receiving the promised inheritance. And so is it a warning for each one of us today, brethren. In spite of God's mercy to call us into His Truth and separate us as His chosen people, if we ultimately take His mercy and longsuffering for granted, failing to effect the necessary changes in our lives—overcoming—He will also blot out our names from the Book of Life, and we will not inherit that Kingdom.

He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death (Revelation 21:7–8).

If we deny we have these wicked traits to master, we certainly will never overcome. Only those who recognize what they truly are, can begin to act upon that knowledge and effect changes through the power of God's Holy Spirit. This is the real significance of Passover and the days of Unleavened Bread. If we admit what we are in comparison to the perfection of Jesus Christ, resist justifying ourselves, and earnestly set about the task of putting sin out of our lives, God will show infinite mercy to us

along that path. Even though we will continue to struggle against a nature that causes us to trip and fall along that way, if we resist justifying self, and continue fighting forward with zeal and determination, God will honor that sincerity and sustain us through the trials of these last days.

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust. As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more. But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children; To such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his commandments to do them. The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all (Psalms 103:8–19).

Are we of those who truly remember His commandments to do them? If we are, we can have the most rewarding Spring Holy Day season ever, and we can walk forward in confidence that God will protect and sustain us in our times of need. May you each experience the fullness of these blessings God desires to give His faithful children.

Your devoted servant in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned centrally below the typed name.

Jon W. Brisby