

VICTORY, FAITH, AND CHRIST'S SECOND COMING IN REVELATION

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The book of Revelation presents God's people as being involved in the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan. The involvement includes their continuous battle over sins from the time of John up to the Second Coming. There is no guarantee for the people of God to have victory over sins unless they respond positively to the grace of God by accepting Jesus Christ and the redemption by His blood. This is called faith, the key factor to be courageous and victorious over sins.

Key Words: Faith, second coming, great controversy, victory over sins

1. Introduction

More than ten years ago an article on Jesus and the Second Coming in the Apocalypse was published by Ekkehardt Müller straightforwardly highlighted passages in Revelation containing the theme of the Second Coming, terms related to the Second Coming, and the evaluation of those passages. As a result of the evaluation Müller came up with conclusions regarding the manner of the Second Coming, the result of the Second Coming, and the preparation for that event.¹ According to Müller the book of Revelation highlights three aspects of preparation required from the people of God for Christ's second coming: (1) Watching and waiting, (2) taking the words of God seriously, and (3) good works deriving from faith in Jesus.² While his conclusion is all-inclusive, one may expect to see aspects of preparation expressed more connectedly to the war language in Revelation.

The expectation is not without reason. The significant number of the use of the verb *νικάω*, "to overcome," that occurs seventeen times (2:7, 11,

¹ Ekkehardt Müller, "Jesus and His Second Coming in the Apocalypse," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11/1-2 (2000): 205-215.

² *Ibid.*, 214-215.

17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21 (2x); 5:5; 6:2 (2x); 11:7; 12:11; 13:7; 15:2; 17:14; 21:7) suggests that there is a battle to fight. Its consistent occurrence in the messages to the seven churches signifies that Christ's church is being involved in a battle. The fact that the term "coming" occurs five times in the section of the seven churches (2:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 11),³ where the verb *νικάω* occurs eight times, indicates that there must be relevancy between the coming of Christ and overcoming.

Another relationship in search is the connection between overcoming and faith. In Revelation, the concept of faith is presented by the occurrences of the noun *πίστις*, "faith" (2:13, 19; 13:10; 14:12), and the adjective *πιστός*, "faithful" (1:5; 2:10, 13; 3:14; 17:14; 19:11; 21:5, 6). If overcoming has something to do with the Second Coming, and if overcoming is related to faith, then the three themes are interrelated: overcoming, faith, and the Second Coming. It is the task of this paper to highlight that connection. First, I will present each of the three themes in Revelation to see their function in their contexts. The next step is to see the relationship among the three themes and the function of victory and faith in the preparation for the Second Coming.

2. Victory over Sins

As introduced above, the book of Revelation is rich of war motifs. Of the eighteen occurrences of the word *πόλεμος*, "war, battle, strife, conflict," in the New Testament, nine times it occurs in Revelation. The cognate verb *πολεμέω*, "wage war, fight," occurs six times in Revelation out of ten times in the New Testament (2:16; 12:7 [2x]; 13:4; 17:14; 19:11). These two words are used to describe two parties involved in a battle or conflict as presented in the diagram below:⁴

Verses	Verb	Parties Involved in the War
2:16	<i>πολεμήσω</i>	Jesus against unrepentant Christians
11:7	<i>ποιήσει πόλεμον</i>	The beast against the two witnesses
12:7	<i>πολεμήσαι</i>	Michael against the dragon

³ There are two terms conveying the idea of "coming" in the message to the seven churches: *ἔρχομαι* (2:5, 16; 3:11), and *ἔξω* (2:25; 3:3).

⁴ The word *πόλεμος*, "war, battle," is considered only when it is the object of the verb *ποιέω*, "to make." Thus the pairing of the two conveys the active notion of "to make war" or "to fight." It is in this sense we may see at least two involved parties. For this reason, the word *πόλεμος* in Rev 9:7, 9 and 20:8 is excluded from the diagram above. Also, since the word *πόλεμος* in 16:14 is elaborated in Rev 19:11, 19, it is excluded.

12:7	ἐπολέμησεν	The dragon against Michael
12:17	ποιῆσαι πόλεμον	The dragon against the remnant
13:4	πολεμήσαι	Who against the sea-beast?
13:7	ποιῆσαι πόλεμον	The sea-beast against the saints
17:14	πολεμήσουσιν	The beast against the Lamb
19:11	πολεμεῖ	The faithful and true against wicked nations
19:19	ποιῆσαι τὸν πόλεμον	The wicked nations against the faithful and true

The diagram above indicates that Jesus and Satan have been the two contenders in the conflict. Jesus is presented as both the one making war and the object of war and so are Satan, the sea-beast, and the wicked nations. The case is different with the people of God.⁵ The diagram does not present them as the ones making war. Instead, the two witnesses, the remnant, and the saints are always the target of war. The beast of Rev 11 makes war against the two witnesses because of their prophecy and testimony (11:7). Satan makes war against the remnant of the woman's seed that they may stop keeping the commandments of God and disregard the testimony of Jesus Christ (12:17). The sea-beast makes war against the saints that they may worship the sea-beast (13:7, 8). This picture seems to suggest that the people of God are merely a target of war. One may ask if they have an active part in the war. An exegetical logic below may explain.

Some of the references of the table above include the result expected from the battle—a victory. This is described by the use of the verb νικάω, "to overcome, conquer," after the verb πολεμέω or the phrase ποιῆσαι πόλεμον: the beast coming out of the abyss makes war and overcomes the two witnesses (Rev 11:7); the sea beast is given power by the dragon to make war and to overcome the saints (13:7); the wicked kings and nations make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb overcomes them (17:14). This

⁵ The designation "people of God" in this paper is also understood as the church. Ekkehardt Müller, "Introduction to the Ecclesiology of the Book of Revelation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 12.2 (2001): 199–200 lists down the various designations of the church in Revelation: "(1) fellow servants, brothers, servants (1:1; 2:20; 6:11; 7:3; 12:10; 19:2, 5; 22:3, 6), (2) the church (*ekklēsia*; 1:4, 11, 20; 2:1, 7, 8, 11, 12, 17, 18, 23, 29; 3:1, 6, 7, 13, 14, 22; 22:16), (3) priests and a kingdom (1:6; 5:10; 20:6), (4) lampstands (1:20), (5) the overcomer (2–3; 15:2; 21:7), (6) the remnant (2:24; 12:7), (7) those in white clothes (3:4–5; 6:11; 7:9, 13), (8) the saints (5:8; 8:3–4; 11:18; 13:7; 14:12; 16:6; 17:7; 18:20, 24; 19:8; 29:9), (9) the 144,000 (7:4–8; 14:1–5), (10) the great multitude (7:9; 17), (11) the holy city (11:12), (12) the woman (12; 19:7; 21:9), (13) those that are called, chosen, faithful (17:14), (14) my people and his people (18:4; 21:3), (15) the bride (21:9; 22:17), and (16) the twelve tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of the Lamb (21:12, 14).

connection indicates that the use of the verb νικάω in Revelation should be understood in the context of war or battle even without the verb πολεμέω. On this basis, the people of God are also actively making war for ten of the seventeen occurrences of the verb νικάω in Revelation present the people of God as the subject (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7).⁶

Being the target of a fight does not necessarily connote a passive position. For example, although Rev 17:4 presents the wicked kings making war against the Lamb, it is the Lamb that shall overcome them (τὸ ἄρνιον νικήσει αὐτούς). It means the Lamb also fights against them. In this line of understanding, the people of God also make war against the dragon and the beast. In what way do the saints make war? While for a spiritual reason, namely to gain worship from the saints, the dragon and the sea-beast involve oppression and persecution (13:10, 15, 17), the people of God have their own way of making war against the enemy. To know the weapon of God's people, the nature of the war should be further clarified.

To each of the seven churches the promises to the overcomer are given. Interestingly, only five of them Christ calls for repentance: Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea.⁷ Also, it is only in the messages to these five churches that Christ exposes the sins of each of them. The Christians in Ephesus forsake their first love (2:4); those in Pergamum and Thyatira are involved in adultery and idolatry (2:14, 20); the many in Sardis do defile their white garments (3:4); Christians in Laodicea suffer from spiritual poverty, blindness and nakedness (3:17). Apparently, the Christians of these five churches are involved in a battle against sins in the sense of struggling to come out from those sins. How about the other two churches? To them is also given the promise if they overcome. Although there is no mention of specific sins they are struggling, their battle is that they may not give up their faith and fall into sins alluring them. God's reward of eternal life will be theirs only if they have victory over sins.

To understand further the battle over sins, it is necessary to see the overall picture of the Great Controversy outlined in the central piece of Revelation: Rev 11:19–15:4.⁸ The intensity and the continuity of the battle are described here. This section may be structured into three parts:

⁶ Seven occurrences of the verb in the section of the Seven Churches (chaps. 2 and 3) is in singular substantival participles connoting that any individual of the church members can be overcoming.

⁷ The call for repentance is evident from the use of the verb μετανοέω, "to repent" (2:5, 16, 21; 3:3, 19).

⁸ Joel N. Musvosvi, "The Issue of Genre and Apocalypse Prophecy," *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies* 5 (2002): 54. He calls this passage "Cosmic Conflict." Some time later he includes 11:19 and 15:1–4 with chaps. 12–14, and establishes 11:19–15:4 as

- A The great conflict: From heaven to earth (11:19–13:18)
 - B The eschatological victory (14:1–5)
- A¹ The great conflict: From earth to heaven (14:6–15:4)

The main theme in Part A is worship. In this part, the verb προσκυνέω, “to worship, bow down, kneel,” occurs six times (13:3, 4, 8, 12, 15). The dragon puts forth all his efforts in order to get himself worshiped. His efforts include: war against Michael (12:7–9); war against the “male child” (12:4, 5); war against the woman (vv. 6, 13–16); war against the remnant of the seed of the woman (v. 17). This has been a continuous battle to gain worship from the time the battle took place in heaven up to the period after the 1260 years. All the efforts of the dragon bring a result that he has expected. Excluding the woman and the remnant of her seed (12:6, 14–17), the entire world “worshiped the dragon” (13:4), “and they worship the beast” (13:3, 4), “And all who dwell on the earth will worship him [the sea beast]” (v. 8).

Part B of the structure above seems to interrupt the flow of the apocalyptic narrative. It does not chronologically continue the previous narrative. While the conflict continues in 14:6 with the messages of the three angels, 14:1–5 presents the end result of the conflict, the victory of the Lamb with those who have been following Him faithfully.

Next, Part A¹ (14:6–15:4) presents the great conflict from another perspective and in a new stage. While in part A Satan seems to dominate the conflict on the earth, the scene changes in part A¹. Here the dragon, in this case, his sea-beast, and those who worship the beast receive a threat of judgment through the messages of the three angels. The conflict continues on the earth (14:6–20) and ends with the harvest on the earth (vv. 14–20), and a great victory that is celebrated in heaven (15:1–4).

Worship is the issue in the messages of the three angels.⁹ The word προσκυνέω appears considerably in the section of the three angels (14:6–13),

the center of the chiasmic structure. Joel N. Musvosvi, *Syllabus for NTST 670 The Book of Revelation*, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines, 2004. William Shea, “The Controversy Over the Commandments In the Central Chiasm of Revelation,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11/1–2 (2000): 217, also seems to suggest Rev 11:9–15:4 as the central section of Revelation. He says, “Rev 11:19 is the fourth sanctuary scene and introduces the prophecy of Rev 12:1–15:4, the main prophecy in the center of the book.”

⁹ See also William G. Johnsson, “The Saint’s End-Time Victory Over the Forces of Evil,” in *Symposium on Revelation* (ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vols. 7; Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 2:35. He says, “The first angel issues a call to worship God the Creator in the setting of

namely three times (vv. 7, 9, 11). The target of the three beasts is “every tribe and people and tongue and nation” (Rev 13:7), which is the inhabitants of the earth (v. 8), particularly the saints (v. 7) or “the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (12:17). In counteracting the dragon and his allies, the three angels preach the eternal gospel to “those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people” (14:6): “Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters” (v. 7). The description above indicates that the inhabitants of the earth are in the position of “choose ye this day” (Josh 24:15), and the saints are in the position of “hold on to what you have” (Rev 3:11). This is their battle.

The message of the second angel announces the fall of Babylon (14:8), and God’s people are called to come out of her that they “may not partake of her sins (ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις αὐτῆς)” (18:4). Here is one of three places in Revelation where the word ἁμαρτία, “sin,” appears (Rev 1:5; 18:4, 5). This indicates that the battle fought by God’s people both those that are still in Babylon and those that are outside is a battle against sins.¹⁰ Oppression, persecution, and threat of death are only means to defeat God’s people and make them give up their faith.

It is in the continuous great conflict between Christ and Satan that the people of God take part. They have to choose whom they shall worship while their battle is continuing. Moreover, if the seven churches are understood to be representing a historical timeline since the period of the

the judgment hour; the second declares and exposes the system of false worship; the third issues a dire warning against the worship of the beast and its image.” Ibid.

¹⁰ William Shea also observes that since the introductory sanctuary scene highlights the Ten Commandments in the Ark of the Covenant, “the controversy in the end time described in Rev 12:1–15:4 should, therefore, involved the Ten Commandments.” Jon Paulien elaborates on Rev 13 that the beasts counterfeit the first four commandments in the effort to gain worship from the inhabitants of the earth and, not impossibly, from God’s people: “In Rev 13 the beasts not only counterfeit the persons of the godhead, but counterfeit each of the first four commandments of the Decalogue, as well. The first commandment says, ‘You shall have no other gods before me,’ but the sea beast takes the place of God by receiving worship of itself (Rev 13:4, 8). The second commandment warns against the worship of images, yet the land beast raises up an image to be worshiped (Rev 13:14–15). The third commandment says, ‘You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God,’ but the sea beast has the names of blasphemy written all over it (Rev 13:1, 5, 6).” Jon Paulien, “Revisiting the Sabbath in the Book of Revelation,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 9/1–2 (1998): 185. Since “sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4), the battle described in the central section of Revelation is, on the part of the saints, a battle over sins.

early church up to the eschaton¹¹ then the battle over sins is continuous. In any given period of time, victory over sins is indispensable for entering heaven.¹² At the end, the group of people who are saved is described as those who are victorious over the beast and the image of the beast (Rev 15:2). Only those who overcome sins will inherit the new heaven and the new earth (21:7)

3. Battle over Sins and the Second Coming

The messages to the seven churches indicate that the second coming of Jesus is the ultimate event being promised by the Lord. Five of the seven messages to the churches contain explicitly the term "coming" referring to both the Second Coming and the judgment.

Although the term "coming" does not occur in the messages to the other two churches, Smyrna and Laodicea, the concept of the Second Coming implicitly exists there.¹³ It should be noted that in the messages to the five churches Christ's coming is always mentioned before the mention of the promises of reward to the overcomers.¹⁴ It seems to suggest that Christ's coming is the finish line, and if a Christian reaches it he/she will receive the promised rewards.

Two aspects need to be highlighted in regard to the connection between "overcoming" and the Second Coming. First, the present participles "overcoming" give clue that a Christian should be continuously overcoming or at least that the battle over sins is a continuous one.¹⁵ Second, the fact that Christ's second coming is the finish line to reach indicates that the battle against sins has a time limit. Thus, the battle against sins is continuous but not everlasting. While the battle

¹¹ I argue in one of my papers that the seven churches do not only describe what happened in the time of John, but also represent the Christian church from the time of John up to the eschaton. See Richard Sabuin, "Historicism: An Adventist Approach?—A Response to the Challenges to Historicism" *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 11.2 (2008): 159–74. See also Clinton Wahlen, "Heaven's View of the Churches in Revelation 2 and 3" *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 9.2 (2006): 146–156, who presents the apocalyptic nature of the seven churches.

¹² John Henry Bennetch, "The Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ for the Seven Churches of the Apocalypse," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 96 no 383 (J1-S 1939): 364, says "No church was excused from gaining victory over sin. In the life under grace foes confronted the seven churches on every hand under the leadership of the Archenemy."

¹³ Müller, "Jesus and His Second Coming," 209.

¹⁴ This is obvious particularly with the positive overtones of the term "coming" in the messages to the churches of Thyatira and Philadelphia. *Ibid.*

¹⁵ τῶ νικῶντι (Rev 2:7, 17), ὁ νικῶν (2:11, 26; 3:5, 12, 21)

seems to be raging, there is hope that it will come to an end. The Second Coming marks the end of the saints' battle over sins.¹⁶

The connection between the victory over sins and the Second Coming in the messages to the seven churches may help to see the same connection in other Second Coming passages in Revelation: the sixth and the seventh seal (6:12–8:1); the seventh trumpet (11:15–18); the harvest of the world (14:14–20); the seven last plagues (16:1–21); the marriage supper and the rider on the white horse (19:1–21).¹⁷

The sealed and saved ones, that is the great multitude (Rev 7:9), are those who have come out of the great tribulation (θλίψις) (v. 14). While the great tribulation may refer to a physical persecution, the cause of the persecution is the faithfulness of the saints. The case of the church in Smyrna may serve as an example. The saints of this church suffer tribulation (θλίψις) because of their unceasing faithfulness to Christ (2:10). They are commanded to keep on being faithful until death (γίνου πιστὸς ἄχρι θανάτου). The present imperative γίνου commands for a consistent faithfulness of those Christians. They are not commanded to be faithful from the time they are thrown into prison. Instead, they are instructed to remain faithful as they have been although they will go to prison. It is in this setting that the promise to the overcomers is given. Hence, coming out from a great tribulation may be understood as coming out victoriously from the battle over sins, and only those victorious over sins are ready for the Second Coming.

The picture of Christ's coming in the seventh trumpet contains the element of reward that refers back to the messages to the seven churches. To the seven churches, the promises of reward are given in future forms.¹⁸ When the seventh trumpet is blown, "the time has come . . . for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great (Rev 11:18). Here, the use of the aorist ἦλθεν indicates that the time has come for the fulfillment of what was

¹⁶ Müller, "Jesus and His Second Coming," 214, based on Revelation 19, summarizes the connection between Christ's second coming and the victory of the saints as follows: "Jesus returns as the rider on the white horse. His heavenly army follows Him. Armageddon takes place. The evil powers are judged. God's people are liberated and are able to participate in the marriage supper."

¹⁷ I thank Dr. Müller who demonstrated that these passages are clearly presenting the Second Coming. *Ibid.*, 211–214.

¹⁸ δώσω, "I will give" (Rev 2:7, 17[2x], 26, ; 3:21), ποιμανεῖ, "he shall reign" (2:26); περιβαλεῖται, "he shall be arrayed" (3:5); οὐ μὴ ἐξαιρέσω, "I shall never remove" (3:5); ὁμολογήσω, "I will confess" (3:5); ποιήσω, "I will make" (3:12); γράψω, "I will write" (3:12).

previously promised.¹⁹ Since the promises of reward are given to the overcomers, it is only them who may enjoy the rewarding at the Second Coming.

Now, when the Second Coming in Rev 14:14–20 is discussed, the presentation of the overcomers in 15:1–4 should be also considered for at least two reasons. First, the passage presents the people “who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name” (v. 2). These are the saints who struggle in the battle over all kinds of oppressions initiated by the beast (13:1–10), by his image (13:11–17), and by the number of his name (13:18). They are oppressed so that they may transgress the law of God or do sins. Second, the song sung by these people (15:3–4) resembles the message of the first angel. The three imperatives of the first angel’s message to fear, give glory, and worship (14:7) are echoed in the same order in the song to fear, glorify, and worship the Lord (15:4). They praise the Lamb who has made them victorious. They have refused to worship the beasts and been determined to worship only the Creator. They have gone through a battle over sins before the Second Coming (14:14–20). Therefore, the reference to this group mentioned in 15:2–4 suggests that only those who overcome sins are considered ready at the Second Coming.

Revelation 15:1–4, particularly verse 1, introduces the seven last plagues wherein the Second Coming is described (16:12–21). Before the pouring out of the first plague, a significant momentum takes place: no one is allowed to enter the heavenly temple (15:8).²⁰ This signals the absence of intercessory ministry in the sanctuary. No one was able to enter into the place where the intercessory ministry was held. The absence of intercessory ministry indicates no reconciliation for sin.²¹ This is

¹⁹ In the construction ἦλθεν ἡ ὀργή σου καὶ ὁ καιρὸς the verb ἦλθεν may be ecliptically understood as the verb for ὁ καιρὸς also. The same verb is also used in Rev 14:15 in the context of the Second Coming: ἦλθεν ἡ ὥρα θερίσαι, “the hour to reap has come.”

²⁰ This is different from the setting of the seven trumpets. The seven trumpets are blown when “the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel’s hand” (8:4). There is an intercessory ministry in the sanctuary. In the OT “incense” is used for the sin offering, in which the priest was to “put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense which is before the LORD in the tent of meeting” (Lev 4:7). By doing this, the priest “shall make atonement for him in regard to his [the sinner’s] sin, and he shall be forgiven” (v. 26). It is also used on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:12,13). In the context of the sin offering and the Day of Atonement, no intercessory ministry means no forgiveness of sin.

²¹ See further discussion on the OT background to Rev 15:8 in Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002), 480. Willim Shea puts it this way: “After they (the angels) have departed on their mission of pouring out the plagues on earth, the glory of God flares up in such a way that no one can enter the temple until the

evident from the fact that despite of the great terror of the plagues, the wicked do not repent (16:9–11). On the other hand, the saints have been declared victorious (15:2).²² Sin still exists but it does not have power over the saints any longer. The time for vengeance upon the oppressors has come (16:5, 6).²³ Jesus is coming.

It has been demonstrated above that the battle over sins is continuous but has a limit. At the Second Coming, at the close of probation just before Christ's return, the saints are declared victorious over sins. Each of them has won his/her personal battle over sins. One question remains: How do they overcome?

4. Victory over Sins and Faith

The victory of the saints cannot be separated from the victory of Jesus Christ. He says, "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne" (Rev 3:21). He overcame the dragon in heaven (12:7–9); He overcame at the cross (5:5–7); He overcomes the evil power and the wicked nations (17:13–14); He overcomes the beast and the false prophet (19:19–21); and finally, He overcomes the devil at the end of the millennium (20:7–10). The victory of Jesus should not be considered merely as a motivation for the saints to overcome. It is the source of their victory. If Jesus and His victory is the source of the victory of the saints over sins, there must be something that binds or attaches the saints to Jesus. This is to be seen from two sides: (1) what Jesus has done for the saints, and (2) how the saints respond to what He has done for them.

mission of the plague angels is completed. This is another way of saying that all redemptive ministry in the heavenly sanctuary is now concluded. Probation for the human race has closed, and now it remains only to pour out these judgments before Christ comes a second time." William H. Shea, "The Cultic Calendar for the Introductory Sanctuary Scenes of Revelation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11/1-2 (2000): 128.

²² I agree with Shea that Rev 15:1–4 is the climax of Rev 12–14 and that "the chapter division is in the wrong place" (*ibid.*). However, I would posit that Rev 15:1–4 has an additional role, to introduce the seven last plagues. Verse 1 mentions about the seven angels with seven last plagues, and vv. 2–4 about the saints harvested at the Second Coming (14:14–20). It seems that the early introduction of the plagues in 15:1 followed by the mentioning of the victorious saints indicates that the saints are declared victorious as the plagues begin.

²³ Joel N. Musvosvi, *Vengeance in the Apocalypse* (vol. 17; Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993), 238. He particularly points out that "the third plague answers the question of the fifth seal." *Ibid.*, 239.

From the beginning of the book of Revelation Jesus has been introduced as the one who “loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev 1:5). Interestingly, the overcomers are described as those who have responded positively to the redemption by the blood of Jesus. “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and *made them white in the blood of the Lamb*” (7:14); “*They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb* and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (12:11). In this way, the victory of Jesus on Calvary by His blood is not merely a motivation for the saints to overcome, but the source of their victory over sins.

The New Testament clearly draws a connection between the blood of Jesus and faith. The saints are redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect . . . Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God” (1 Pet 1:19, 21). Salvation is by grace through faith (Eph 2:8). This is the unquestionable formula of salvation. In the case of the apocalyptic narrative of Revelation, the saints are saved because they receive the grace of God through the death (blood) of Jesus Christ, and in their struggle against sins they overcome because of their faith in Jesus Christ who has redeemed them by His blood.

For John, this is not a new concept. In one of his epistles he says, “For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4).²⁴ In this context, overcoming the world means overcoming sins because “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life” (2:16 NAS) are in the world. At the beginning of chap. 2, John has indicated the purpose of his writing: “I write this to you so that you will not sin” (2:1). Moreover, in this chapter victory over the evil one is repeated twice using the verb *νικάω* (vv. 13, 14),²⁵ and faith is the secret for victory (5:4).

In Revelation, faith is presented as a characteristic of the saints. After presenting the effort of the beast to force God’s people to worship the beast, an encouragement is given: “This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints” (Rev 13:10). The genitive construction *ἡ πίστις τῶν ἁγίων* must be a subjective genitive: the faith that the saints have; the saints believe. This text presents only the subject (the saints) and the verbal noun (faith). What/who is the object?

²⁴ I assume common authorship of the gospel of John, the epistles of John, and the Apocalypse.

²⁵ Interestingly, it seems that the term “overcoming” expressed in the verb *νικάω* in the NT almost exclusively belong to John: twenty four out of twenty eight times (John 16:33; 1John 2:13, 14; 4:4; 5:4[2x]; 5:5; Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21[2x]; 5:5; 6:2[2x]; 11:7; 12:11; 13:7; 15:2; 17:14; 21:7).

Revelation 14:12, reemphasizes this encouragement: Ὡδε ἡ ὑπομονὴ τῶν ἁγίων ἐστίν, οἱ τηροῦντες τὰς ἐντολὰς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν πίστιν Ἰησοῦ, "Here is the patient endurance of the saints, those keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (my translation). The text explains two things: First, it identifies the saints as "those keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus."²⁶ Second, it suggests the object of the verbal noun πίστις. The genitive construction τὴν πίστιν Ἰησοῦ should not be seen as a subjective genitive because 13:10 has presented the subject of the verbal noun ἡ πίστις, namely, the saints. What is needed is the object. Therefore the τὴν πίστιν Ἰησοῦ is to be read as an objective genitive. Hence, the verbal noun ἡ πίστις in the central piece of Revelation appears with both the subject and the object conveying the message that the saints should believe in Jesus.

Syntactically, the participle οἱ τηροῦντες has two direct objects: τὰς ἐντολὰς τοῦ θεοῦ and τὴν πίστιν Ἰησοῦ. In the writings of John the phrase "the commandments of God" is a common direct object of the verb τηρέω (John 14:15, 21; 15:10 [2x]; 1John 2:3, 4, 3:22, 24; 5:3). The verb, however, never takes "the faith of Jesus" or even "the faith" as its direct object, neither in the writings of John nor in the entire NT except in Rev 14:12. The message is clear. In the midst of the Great Controversy wherein the saints are involved in a battle over sins they should have patient endurance and remain identified as those keeping the commandments of God and keeping their faith in Jesus Christ. It is not only the matter of having faith in Jesus but also to maintain the faith in Jesus. This is a concept of faithfulness.

In the NT Greek the word ἡ πίστις and πιστός are in one group of words.²⁷ This being the case, the use of the adjective πιστός in reference to God's people does not only indicate a state of being faithful but also having faith. For example, Rev 17:14 hints at the importance of faith in the battle over sins. Those who are with the Lamb will win. These are those who are called, chosen, and faithful. They are not only called but also chosen (cf. Matt 22:14), not only chosen but faithful. The condition to win together with Jesus is being faithful, namely being loyal in faith.

²⁶ The antecedent of the masculine plural article οἱ must be τῶν ἁγίων, the only possible one in the context.

²⁷ R. Bultmann, "The pistis Group in the NT," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged edition; eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 853, suggests that in a case like Rev 2:10 and 13, πιστός is understood as the loyalty of faith. Therefore, given a similar context of the great controversy as in Rev 2:10, this adjective may also convey the meaning of loyalty of faith in 17:14.

5. Overcoming, Believing, and the Second Coming

After looking at the relationships between the victory of sins and the Second Coming, and the victory over sins and faith, let us now connect all three together. The place of Rev 14:12 just before the eschatological narrative of the Second Coming (vv. 14–20) suggests that the saints may come up victorious at the Second Coming if they should keep their faith in Jesus Christ. Even if they die before the return of Christ they should die in their faith in Jesus Christ. Only with that condition this promise applies to them: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on . . . they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them” (v. 13). In this context, to “die in the Lord” must mean that they die while they are keeping their faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, while the battle is continuing faith in Jesus Christ must also be continuously kept.²⁸

The three related components, overcoming, believing, and the Second Coming, are portrayed together in Christ’s message to the Christians in Smyrna. To the Christians in Smyrna Christ says, “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer . . . Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev 2:10). There are two imperatives in this text: μηδὲν φοβοῦ, “Do not be afraid (stop being afraid of anything),” and γίνου πιστός, “be faithful (continue being faithful). Christ encourages the Christians to stop being afraid in facing tribulations. One of the functions of the phrase “do not be afraid” is to give encouragement for God’s people in facing a battle. No less than thirty OT references testify it.²⁹ To the Christians in Smyrna this is an encouragement for not being afraid of the oppressions designed to make them give up their faith. Moreover, the promise given to the one who overcomes (ὁ νικῶν, 2:11) confirms that the saints in Smyrna are in a battle. This is not a physical battle because there is no guarantee that they will escape the first death. Although they may experience the first death, the second death will not be theirs if they overcome. Thus it is a spiritual battle, the battle over sins.

The imperative “be faithful” implies a command to continue holding fast the faith. This is their weapon in their battle over sins. They have to remain faithful “until (ἄχρι) death” (2:10). The preposition ἄχρι, “until,”

²⁸ The present participle οἱ τηροῦντες implies a continuous keeping of both the commandments of God and the faith in Jesus.

²⁹ The following OT references contain encouragements to God’s people not to be afraid in facing their enemies: Exod 14:13; Num 14:9; 21:34; Deut 1:21, 29; 3:2; 3:22; 7:18; 20:1, 3; 31:6, 8; Josh 8:1, 10; 10:25; 11:6; Judg 6:23; 2Sam 13:28; 2Kings 6:16; 2Chron 20:15, 17; 32:7; Neh 4:14; Isa 7:4; 10:24; 35:4; 37:6; Jer 40:9; 42:11; 46:27; 51:46; Joel 2:21.

indicates "the continuous extent of time up to a point."³⁰ In the case of the Christians in Smyrna, they are encouraged to remain faithful from the point they receive the message through a period of time and up to the point of their death.³¹ What does it mean?

The mention of the crown (of life) for the saints is found only twice in the messages to the seven churches (2:10; 3:11). In both places the same word *στέφανος* is used. To the church of Smyrna *στέφανος* is related to the death of the saints, and to the church of Philadelphia it is related to the coming of Jesus. This parallel suggests that the Christians in Smyrna are encouraged to remain faithful until death or until the second coming of Jesus, and the Christians in Philadelphia are to remain faithful until the Second Coming or until death (cf. 2:25, 26).³² While the battle is continuously going on, the saints should continuously hold fast their faith in Jesus until two possible points of time: their death or the Second Coming. The apocalyptic narrative of the great controversy outlined in the central piece of Revelation supports this idea. As discussed above, the beatitude about those who die in the Lord (14:13) and the portrayal of the Second Coming (vv. 14–20) are presented right after the mentioning of the importance of faith in Jesus Christ on the part of the saints (v. 12). This means the saints are to hold fast continuously their faith in Jesus either until they die or until Jesus comes the second time.

While the two imperatives in Rev 2:10, "do not be afraid" and "be faithful," are encouragements for the saints that they may not be injured

³⁰ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (2 vols.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), s.v. "ἄχρι."

³¹ Several uses of the preposition ἄχρι in Revelation, such as Rev 2:26; 12:11; 20:3, 5 also indicate a temporal sense.

³² Connecting the message to the church at Smyrna and the message to Philadelphia is supported by the parallels between the two churches below:

Smyrna (2:8–11)	Philadelphia (3:7–13)
Μετανοέω is absent (it occurs in the messages to all other churches)	Μετανοέω is absent
"those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (2:9)	"those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not" (3:9)
"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested (πειρασθήτε)" (2:10)	"I also will keep you from the hour of testing (τοῦ πειρασμοῦ)" (3:10)
"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life (τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς)" (2:10)	"hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown (τὸν στέφανόν σου)" (3:11)

by the second death, Rev 21:8 presents the opposite of the two as the characteristics of those whose ultimate destiny is the second death: "the cowardly (δειλός) and unbelieving (ἀπίστος)" (21:8). This is a set of negative attitudes that Jesus used to describe the reaction of His disciples toward the raging sea. He asked them: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 4:40; cf. Matt 8:26). Being the first two on the list of the evil characteristics (Rev 21:8), "the cowardly and unbelieving" are mentioned just after the summary of the promise to the overcomers: "He who overcomes will inherit all this" (v. 7). This seems to present adjacently the contrast between the overcomers and the ones who do not overcome. At the same time, the contrast between the two groups highlights the tight connection between victory over sins and faith and the importance of faith in bringing victory over sins.

5. Conclusion

The book of Revelation presents a picture of the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan. God's people are involved in this controversy in their battle over sins, which is continuously going on from the time of John up to the present. Each Christian is being involved in the battle to come out from sins and/or to remain faithful to Jesus Christ. There is no guarantee for the people of God to have victory over sins unless they respond positively to the grace of God by accepting Jesus Christ and the redemption by His blood. This is called faith, the key factor to be courageous and victorious over sins. The fact that the saints are instructed to keep on holding fast their faith in Jesus suggests that faith is their initial response in accepting Jesus Christ as their Redeemer. Just like the battle is continuous, the Christians should also maintain their faith in Jesus continuously. Those coming out victorious are those maintaining their faith until they die or until the second coming of Jesus Christ.

This study was limited to looking at the correlations between victory over sins, faith, and the Second Coming. Terms such as justification by faith and sanctification by faith were not explicitly discussed. They were implicitly hinted on in the discussion about the connection between victory over sins and faith. Others are encouraged to continue this discussion by highlighting the connection between justification, sanctification, faith and works, and the close of probation in the book of Revelation.