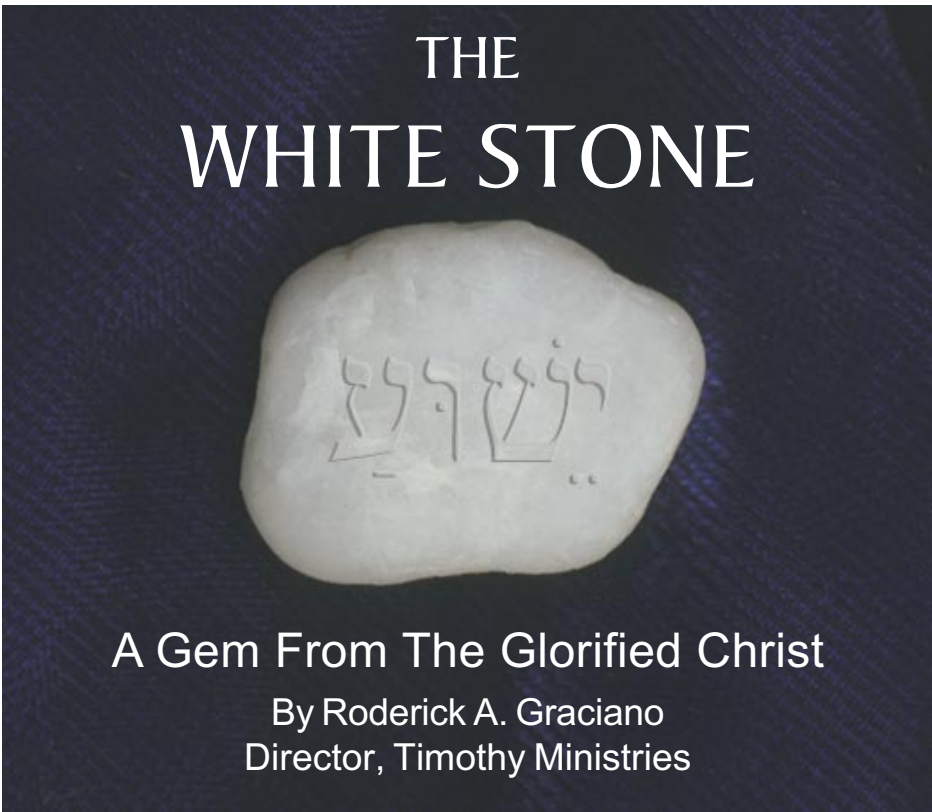




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Meaningful
identity
depends not
only upon
relationship
but upon
lasting
relationship.



Who Is The Overcomer?

The glorified Christ described by the apostle John in Revelation, chapter one, makes spectacular promises in the following chapters of the book. He addresses these promises to “him who overcomes” (Rev. 2.7, etc.), so we naturally wonder, who is this overcomer? Our question is answered as we read the Revelation and discover that the “overcomer” is anyone who trusts Christ to the end, overcoming every temptation to abandon his faith.

We know that this final victory over unbelief will be won by every true child of God. As John wrote in 1 John 5.4: “...everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even *our faith*.” Assuredly then, the promises of Christ to the overcomer are promises to every Christian, rather than to some elite subset within the Christian church. Therefore each of us who believe can clutch these promises to our hearts and rejoice in them.

The promise to the overcomer that most delights me is in Revelation 2.17. In this verse Christ promises the overcomer a white stone. This promise is difficult to appreciate at first glance—who would reward his loved ones with a stone? However, the white stone is actually a promise of *acquittal, admittance, identity* and *intimacy*.

The White Stone of Acquittal

A custom was of old, and still remains,
Which life or death by suffrages ordains:
White stones and black within an urn are cast,
The first absolve, but fate is in the last.

(Ovid, *Metam.* lib. xv., ver. 41)



Ovid's verse above describes how juries in the Mediterranean world of the apostle John's day voted using pebbles. As a juror made his way to the place where trials were held, he would pick up a black pebble and a white one along the path. Later, after both sides of a case were presented, each juror would vote by approaching an urn set up for the purpose, and dropping either their black or their white pebble into it. A black pebble was a vote to condemn the defendant, a white pebble a vote to acquit. Once all the jurors had cast their votes, the urn would be upended, the white and black stones counted and the case decided accordingly.

Now let us recall that we ourselves were each put on trial at Mt. Sinai. Our jurors were the 613 commandments of God (to use the rabbinical count). Each and every one of those holy jurors dropped a black pebble into the urn as a vote against us, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking *all* of it" (James 2.10). When the urn was inverted, pouring forth the stones to be counted, however, they were all found to be gleaming white.

How did all the pebbles turn white at our trial before the divine tribunal? Clearly it was a miracle like the one Ovid describes in his *Metamorphoses* (Book 15, Fable 1). In that story, Hercules magically turned all the black stones in the urn white to get Myscelos acquitted for illegally attempting to leave Argos. Myscelos *was* guilty, however, and *so are we*. Who would turn our stones white, and what has become of justice? In our case, it was the judge Himself who performed the miracle, but he did not *turn* the black stones white: he *exchanged* them. He placed a white stone in each of our hands and took all of our black ones for himself. Then he carried all our black stones to the cross where He himself satisfied justice by accepting condemnation in our place. Now we hold the white stone as a sign of our eternal acquittal.

The White Stone of Admittance

Besides acquittal, white stones had another connotation in antiquity. When a gladiator or athlete performed victoriously in the arena, a nobleman might send the champion a white stone called a *tessera hospitalis*. This stone, with the noble patron's name etched upon it, served as a pass

granting the champion admittance into the nobleman's post-contest festivities. In similar fashion, once the Christian overcomer has "fought the good fight" and won the contest of faith, his white stone will admit him into the King's banquet. The King Himself will greet the faithful overcomer with the words, "enter into the joy of your master" (Mat. 25.21).

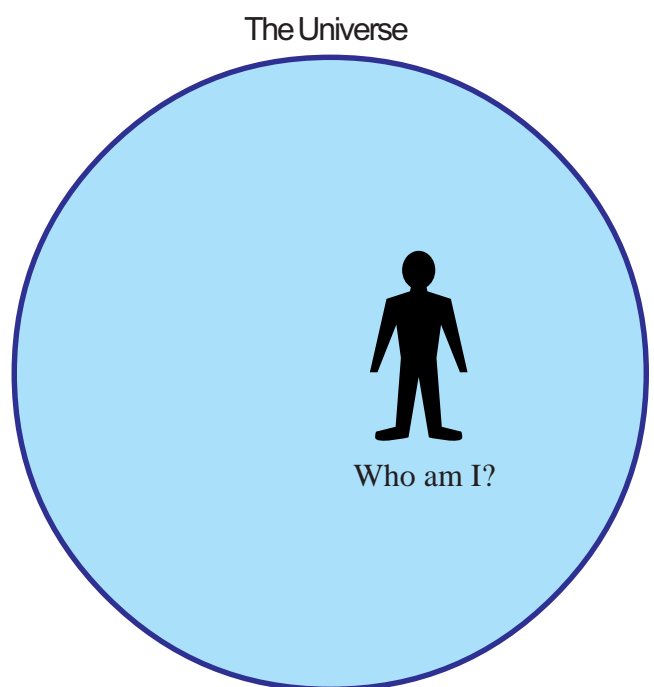
Unlike the gladiators of old, however, the Christian overcomer will not leave the banquet with the same rank he possessed when he entered it. As Paul wrote, "if we endure, we will also *reign* with him" (2 Tim. 2.12). The Christian overcomer who enters the post-contest banquet of his Lord will emerge from it a co-regent with his master, a king in his master's eternal kingdom (Rev. 5.10; 22.3-5). That is not all. The overcomer will receive an even more important identity at this "wedding supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19.9). That additional identity is signified by the name etched on the white stone, for unlike the *tessera hospitalis*, the white stone of the Christian overcomer bears his own name, rather than the name of his benefactor.

The White Stone of Identity

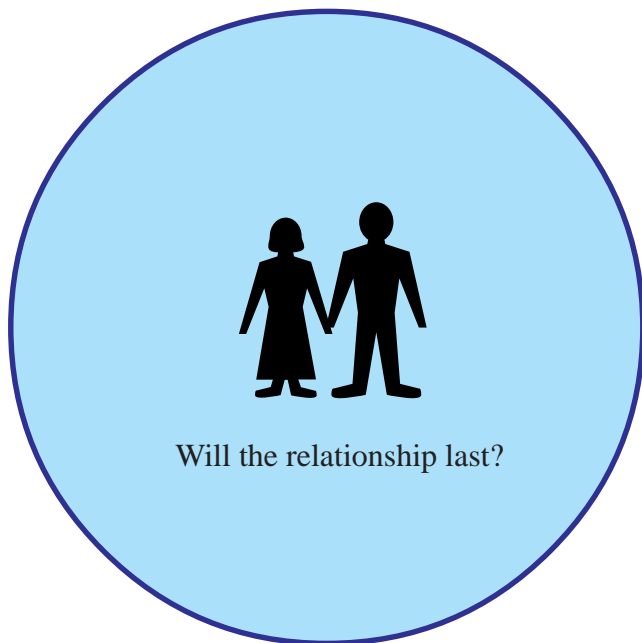
Christ declares that each overcomer's white stone conveys a name to its recipient that is "known *only* to him who receives it." The name etched in the stone is new, permanent and *unique*. Perhaps the name will be like the Indian names in the film *Dances With Wolves*. It will say something about a special quality or accomplishment of the recipient, like "Evangelized Cannibals" or "Successfully Reared Teenagers." The important thing is that by its uniqueness the name on the white stone represents the gift of *personal identity*.

Personal identity distinguishes each of us from the rest of the human race, and is the framework within which we are individually able to discover a sense of purpose and meaning. If we had no personal identity, there would be no *me*, and whatever I was or did would have little or no meaning for there would be no *me* to take responsibility for it. Personal identity is a priceless gift, but we could not have it if we lacked personal uniqueness. Apart from uniqueness, our identity could only be corporate at best, for we would blend and disappear into a crowd of clones. Thankfully we all *do* possess unique qualities that make our identities personal.

Personal identity depends upon much more than uniqueness, however. To help us understand this, join me in a little thought experiment. Imagine for a moment that you are the only person in the universe. There is no one else, no God, no angels, no human beings. Now try to answer the question, "Who am I?" In a truly empty universe the question is unanswerable; it doesn't even have meaning. In an



The Universe



empty universe you would have no identity even though *all* your qualities would be unique. Whatever wonderful traits you might possess would not matter at all, for there would be no one to be aware of them or to care about them one way or the other.

So let's add one more person to our imaginary universe, another person, human and mortal like you. Now who are you? Assuming you are in proximity with that other person, you can now have an identity, and assuming you are not clones who look and think exactly alike, your identity can be personal. Depending upon your genders, you may become the other persons spouse, or you may remain just friends. You may become his master and he your slave, or vice versa. You can compare yourselves and discover that you are the studious one

and she the athletic one, and so on. Any one of these relationships can answer your question, "Who am I?" You can now say, "I am that person's best friend," or whatever. The point is that *identity depends upon relationship*, even more than upon uniqueness. Without uniqueness our identity cannot be personal, but without relationship we can have no identity at all.

There's still a glitch in our imaginary universe, however. Remember that the two people in it are *mortal*. Let's imagine the other person dies first, and you're left alone once more. Now who are you? You're back to being insignificant. You had an identity while your companion lived, but now that temporary identity has evaporated with the relationship. Even the memory of that identity is meaningless, for once again there is no one to care whether you were the master or the slave, the spouse or the friend. Our experiment helps us realize that meaningful identity depends not only upon relationship but upon *lasting* relationship. Personal identity depends upon uniqueness, but any meaningful identity at all depends upon relationship that perdures, i.e., *that lasts forever*. No wonder identity crises plague secular man: having disavowed the possibility of life after death—and with it the possibility of perduring relationships—he cannot find any meaningful answer to the question, "Who am I?" This is precisely what makes the white stone the most precious gem mentioned in Revelation. The white stone represents our personal identity that is based securely upon an eternal relationship!

Of course, relationship as such may not excite us. After all, there are good relationships and bad ones. We'd gladly trade away our identity for a bowl of lentils if that identity were based on an eternal relationship that was abusive—or even just boring. The overcomer need not fear, however, for the eternal relationship we have entered into is the very one which has inspired all our fondest fairy tales, only this relationship is real. It is the relationship that provides that additional identity with which the now royal overcomer emerges from the King's banquet. It is a relationship with the White Stone Himself.

The White Stone of Intimacy

You see, along with all its other meaning, the white stone symbolizes its giver, the Lord Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth is “the living Stone —rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him— For in Scripture it says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame’” (1 Pet. 2.4-7). Jesus is the rock that was cleft to hide His beloved (Song of Solomon 2.14). He was broken open that the living water might spring forth, for the Israelites “drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10.4). He is the rock upon which people build their houses securely (Mat. 7.24). He is the stone with “seven eyes” that removes sin in a single day (Zech. 3.9). He is “the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands,” who reduces the kingdoms of this world to dust and replaces them with His kingdom which will never end (Dan. 2.45). He is the uncreated Stone which the unbelieving Jews presumptuously thought to pelt with pebbles He Himself had created (John 10.31,32). Jesus is “the Rock eternal” (Isaiah 26.4).

But wait! The white stone of Revelation has our name written upon it; does Jesus have our names written upon Him? I believe He does. When the heaven stood open, John saw Christ on a white horse (Rev. 19.11,12). Christ’s eyes, John said, “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.” I believe that name written upon Jesus refers somehow to the corporate multitude that He purchased with His blood. Why does no one else know that name? Probably because no one else *can* know it. Only Jesus Himself can comprehend the price by which he earned the right to bear that name, the name of the redeemed, tattooed upon His shoulders by a Roman lash. We realize that as a mariner might endure the tattooer’s needle to engrave the name of his bride over his heart, Christ endured the Roman nails to engrave our names upon Himself, for we are the object of His eternal affection.



By giving us the engraved white stone then, Jesus symbolically gives us Himself. By giving us an object we can easily enclose in the palm of our hand, He shows that He gives Himself to us wholly, and as an eternal possession. In other words, Jesus gives Himself to us as our bridegroom. Christ has not only purchased our acquittal and admittance into the banquet, but has also given us meaningful identity as His co-regents, and even more importantly *as His bride*. Our identity as kings signifies purpose, but our identity as His bride signifies intimacy. Intimacy is the very deepest longing of our hearts, the longing to be truly known and yet wholly loved. The white stone is a promise that this intimacy we yearn for, intimacy with a Lover Who is Faithful and True, will be granted to us if we hold our faith fast and thereby overcome the world.