

FAITH THAT OVERCOMES THE WORLD

1 John 5:1-21

Key Verse: 5:4b-5

“This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”

The key words of 1 John are “believe” and “love.” Believing is to have faith in Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. This faith produces love for God and love for one another in the Christian fellowship. When this love is put into practice, God’s love is made complete among us. Faith and love cannot be separated; they always go together. When we have genuine faith, loving one another surely follows. The problem is that people tend to emphasize love without connection to faith in Jesus. But without faith in Jesus, it is impossible to have God’s love. It is because faith is the foundation of our relationship with God (Ro 1:17). This is why John emphasizes faith in Jesus the incarnate God in this chapter. When we have faith in Jesus, we can experience victory that overcomes the world.

When we hear the word “victory,” many different ideas may come to mind: passing an exam, getting a good job or a promotion, winning a contest, publishing a paper, earning a lot of money, and so on. It is true that God blesses his people in these ways. But this kind of victory is temporary and relative. Though we have these victories, if we die without hope, we cannot say our lives were truly victorious. On the other hand, if we don’t experience many such victories during our lifetime, but we have the assurance of eternal life and pass into the kingdom of God, our lives are really victorious. We should embrace the true victory which John speaks of. No one wants to be a loser. Everyone wants to be a winner, a victor, a conqueror. The good news is that we are already victors in Jesus Christ. Let’s learn in what respect we are victors, and how to be victorious continually.

First, who is it that overcomes the world? (1-12) In chapter 4 the word “love” was repeated 27 times. In chapter 5 the repetition of “believe” or “faith” is

significant (1,4,5,10[3],13). To believe in Jesus and to love one another is the essence of Christian life, and they are God's commands to be obeyed (3:23). In this section, John summarizes the relationship between faith and love (1-3), and how this faith leads to victory (4-5).

Verse 1 says, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well." This verse tells us why we should love God's children. We believers are called by many titles: "Christians," "disciples," "saints," "Christ-followers," "royal priesthood," "God's people," "strangers and aliens," and so on. Like a diamond turned by a jeweler under a bright light, each designation reveals another facet of our character, role, position or privilege.¹ Yet among them, the title "God's children" is the best. Who are God's children? John says that everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God as his child. There is no other way to be a child of God except through faith in Jesus (Jn 1:12-13). It is God's great miracle to transform a person into his child through faith in Jesus. It is a great privilege for anyone to become a child of God. When we are born again, we cross over from death to life and our nature is transformed from worldly to godly, and especially from hatred to love. Our spiritual eyes are opened to see God who is love, and we can love God. When we love God, we also naturally begin to love his children. It is a general truth that if we love parents we will love their children as well. The same is true with the children of God. We love them, not based on their merit or qualities, but on the fact that they are God's children. Though they may not be lovable, and are sometimes obnoxious, we love them anyway. This love is not based on feelings but God's unconditional love. The question arises, "How can I know that I love God's children when I don't feel love for them in my heart?"

Verses 2-3a tell us how we can know that we love the children of God. When we love God, God's love enables us to keep his commands. We can say that without love, we cannot obey and without obedience, we cannot love others. Many people misunderstand love. They think, "How can I love that person when they are so irritating!?" We wonder how we can love without the feeling of love. Here John says that loving comes from obedience.

¹ Swindoll, Charles, *Swindoll's Living Insight:1,2,3 John and James* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2018) Kindle Edition, p. 119

Obedience is an act of will. When we decide to obey God's command by faith, God helps us to love that person. Then assurance that we love them comes into our hearts.

The problem is that obedience sounds very burdensome. Since Christians live by grace alone, how can we be expected to obey? However, this obedience is not a slavish response to coercion; it is a willing act based on God's love. God's love in his people gives them a desire to love and please him. With eagerness they keep his commandments. Rightly understood and followed, God's commandments bring believers great joy and freedom, not a sense of oppression. We can understand this through our experience. If we love something, such as sports, cooking, art or music, it is not burdensome at all to engage in these pursuits. If we love someone, we are willing to do what they want us to do. It is not burdensome, but delightful. For example, Jacob loved Rachel. When this love was in his heart, serving her father Laban for seven years seemed like only a few days to him (Gen 29:20). This is the power of love. Since this kind of natural love has power, how much more does God's supernatural love have power. God's love empowers us. And the commands to be obeyed are not burdensome at all. They are not like the heavy burdens religious leaders put on people. Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light (Mt 11:30). God's will is good, pleasing and perfect (Ro 12:2). It is the will of an all-wise, all-loving Father who seeks our highest welfare.²

In verse 4 John explains the deeper reason why God's commands are not burdensome: "...for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith." Here we need to understand the meaning of "victory" and "the world." In Greek there is a wordplay. "Victory" is from the Greek word "nikē," which means "to be a victor, to conquer." "Overcomes" is "nikaō" in Greek--the same root which is "victory." There is also a meaningful change in verb tense. "Overcomes" is present tense, while "has overcome" is aorist tense. The aorist tense emphasizes that Jesus already won the victory over the power of sin and Satan once for all through his death and resurrection. Jesus won this victory over the common enemies of mankind as our representative. For example, when David

² Stott, John R.W., *The Letters of John* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988) p. 173.

won the victory over the Philistine champion Goliath, all Israel shared in his victory. Likewise, when we have faith in Jesus, Jesus' victory becomes ours. We live in this victory continually as we rely on Jesus.

John explains how the power of "the world" works in two ways. The first is through the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (2:15). These sinful desires work within people to make them powerless to obey God's command. When our hearts are full of lustful desires or pride we feel very burdened to read the Bible. The second is through Satan's activity as the one who controls the whole world (19). Satan works through lies, false teaching, lawlessness, violence, evil spirits and wicked people. When we are hindered by the world's power we cannot obey God's command. It is very burdensome. How can we overcome these enemies within and without? Faith in Jesus is the only way.

Though we have faith in Jesus, sometimes we do not feel a sense of victory. Rather, we feel like losers. It is because our concept of victory is not based on Jesus' teaching, but the world's standard. To the world wealth, fame, good health and prosperity characterize victory. However, when we observe carefully, many people who are successful in the world are not victorious. They suffer under the power of sin and death and the devil's torment. We need to understand what true blessing is. God wants to bless us in every way, but what he really wants to give us is eternal life. The Bible does not guarantee constant worldly blessings to all believers. As the book of Hebrews tells us, some believers faced jeers, flogging, chains, imprisonment. They were destitute, mistreated, and even killed (Heb 11:36-38). But they never compromised or gave in to fear. They kept their faith to the point of martyrdom, overcoming the power of sin and death. They were true victors. Their reward is eternal life in the kingdom of God (Rev 2:7,10). This is the greatest victory. We need to realize that Jesus has already given us eternal life, the best blessing. We should have no sense of loss for not having worldly success. Rather, we should have a sense of victory because we have overcome the world. John assures his audience of victory by asking a rhetorical question and giving a clear answer: "Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God" (5).

In verses 6-12 John focuses on the object of our faith. Verse 6 says, "This is the one who came by water and blood--Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth." Here "water" refers to Jesus' baptism which initiated his public ministry as the Son of God (Mt 3:13-17; Jn 1:29-34). "Blood" refers to his death on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1Jn 1:7; 2:2). In emphasizing that Jesus came by water and blood John is refuting the false teacher Cerinthus. Cerinthus claimed that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at baptism but left him before his death. In fact, Cerinthus denied Jesus' death as the Son of God for the sin of the world. In response, John points out that the Spirit, the water and the blood testify in agreement that Jesus is the Son of God (7-8). In judicial cases, it was vital for the testimony of witnesses to agree (Dt 19:15). John affirms that all three witnesses agree that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus was revealed as the Son of God through his baptism and his death on the cross. When Jesus died on the cross, a centurion who saw how he died testified, "Surely, this man was the Son of God!" (Mk 15:39) Jesus' resurrection proved this (Ro 1:4). The object of our faith is not a dead hero, but the living, almighty Son of God who triumphed over sin and death.

If human testimony is acceptable, how much more is God's testimony reliable. It is because God's testimony is greater than human testimony (9). God testified that Jesus is the Son of God through his resurrection. Whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony in himself (10a, ESV). Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar because he has not believed God's testimony about his Son (10b,ESV). There is no middle ground. Verses 11-12 tell us the consequences of believing, or not believing, God's testimony. They are very serious. Those who believe in the Son of God receive eternal life. Those who do not believe do not have life. We hear the words "eternal life" so often that we may take them lightly or for granted. But if we do not have eternal life, we face eternal condemnation. Also, eternal life is not just long life without limit; it is true happiness. So believing that Jesus is the Son of God is the most crucial decision one should make.

Second, Christian confidence (13-21). Thus far John emphasized that when we have faith in Jesus, the Son of God, we overcome the world and live as victors. Now he affirms the confidences we can have while living in this world. When

we believe in the Son of God we can have confidence in three things: eternal life, that God hears and answers our prayers, and that God protects us from the evil one.

First of all, we can have confidence that we have eternal life (13). Verse 13 says, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." Why is it important to have such confidence? Then and now, there are many false teachings and lies through which Satan plants doubt and confusion. But when we have confidence, we are not deceived by false teaching or lies and can stand firm to the end. When we know God has given us eternal life, we feel very rich. We can serve others sacrificially with joy, overcoming selfishness and greed. Because we have such a treasure in heaven we are free from anxiety, even if we have little money in our bank account. Our hope is not in something that perishes or spoils, but in the everlasting kingdom of God. With this hope, we can live a meaningful, vibrant and fruitful life in this world. When we have eternal life we lack nothing and can be content, and give thanks to God in all circumstances.

Second of all, we can have confidence that God hears and answers our prayers (14-17). Verses 14-15 say, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him." Why did John now mention prayer after faith in Jesus? It is because prayer is the expression of faith. Without faith, we cannot pray. When we pray, our faith becomes strong and grows. Prayer is the most powerful weapon to overcome the world. Charles Spurgeon said that prayer is the tender nerve that moves the mighty muscle of God's power. The fact that God answers our prayer tells us that the source of victory is God, not us. Our confidence in approaching God is that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. "Anything" indicates that God will answer our prayers--whatever we ask, like a father caring for his children.

However, a most important qualifier is "according to his will." James 4:3 says, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." George Mueller is

known as “the father of ten thousand orphans.” He received 50,000 answers to specific prayers. The secret of his fruitful prayer life was his pure motive. He prayed always according to God’s will. When we pray, God gives us wisdom, strength and courage to do what is right. We can pray anytime and anyplace. Prayer is like talking online with God, but better. We don’t need to install expensive hardware, or memorize passwords. The coverage is worldwide and the connection never fails. God always responds because he is never offline. Lastly, no matter how much you use the service, the fee is absolutely free. Rather, the more frequently you use it, the bigger and better the connection becomes. God gives this great privilege of prayer to his children; if we don’t use it, how foolish we are.

In verses 16-17 John encouraged intercessory prayer. If we see a brother or sister commit a sin, it is easy to judge them and spread the news to others. But we should pray for them quietly and God will give them life. However, in some cases people commit a sin that leads to death. This means they become antichrists. John does not urge prayer for them. All wrongdoing is sin, but unless people become antichrists, we should pray for them.

Third of all, we can have confidence that God will keep us from the evil one (18-21). Though we are living in the world which is controlled by Satan, he cannot harm us because we do not belong to the world, but to God. Believers are free from Satan’s control through sin and the world system. We are under God’s protection. Moreover, the Son of God has granted us understanding which makes possible the knowledge of Jesus Christ. John concluded that Jesus is the true God and eternal life. His final admonition is surprising. Keep yourselves from idols. Idols are anything that people trust and love more than Jesus Christ, who is the true God.

We are living in the ever changing, uncertain world. There are so many false teachings, lies and evil powers which confuse us, lead to despair and make us feel that we are losers. How can we overcome such a world? It is impossible to overcome with our own strength and wisdom. The only way to overcome the world is through faith in Jesus Christ. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.