

“Faith Is the Victory” (An Exposition of 1 John 5:4-5)¹

Introduction

Our text this morning is a brief one – only a couple of verses. In it the Apostle John speaks of the believer having victory over the world. Indeed, he mentions that phrase no less than three times in the span of two short verses.

But what does it mean to have victory over the world? What does the victory of the Christian over the world look like? And what does John mean by it in this particular context? That is not necessarily as easy to discern as we might think at first glance.

We are going to look at three things in our text this morning – you could say *three questions*. First, what does it mean to overcome the world? Second, who are the overcomers who have this victory over the world? And third, what is the means of this victory – how are we to overcome?

The Victory Over the World

First, what does it mean for us as believers in Christ to overcome or have victory over the world? This victory is certainly at the forefront of John's mind here. John Stott writes:

“Three times in three successive sentences, as if to hammer the truth home, John repeats the phrase *overcome the world*. First, he declares that ‘everyone born of God overcomes the world’ (4a). He goes on to ascribe the Christian’s conquest not to his birth but to his *faith* (4b). He then proceeds to enlarge on this fact in the form of a question which he immediately answers: *Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*”²

The word for victory or overcoming is found at least 28 times in the New Testament, most of which are found here in John's first epistle (6X) or in the book of Revelation (14X). So this is a very common theme in John's writings. That being the case, the best way to proceed is to follow the old rule of *allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture*, and let John himself answer the question for us as to what exactly this victory over the world is.

The first thing (and in some ways perhaps the key thing) for us to notice here is the very first word in our text. It is a word that is too easily overlooked. It is that little word **“For”** (v.4). What this word shows us is that there is a direct connection between what we read in our text and what John said in the previous verses.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

“It is obvious from this word *For* at the beginning of the fourth verse that the Apostle here is continuing something that he has already mentioned; so in order to understand the statement of these two verses, we must remind ourselves of the previous verses.”³

1 All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

2 *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 174.

3 *Life in Christ: Studies in 1 John*, p.585

He goes on to explain: “. . . 'For [because] whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world.' That is why the commandments are not heavy; that is the connecting link.”⁴ In other words, John is telling us that *the reason why the commandments of God are not “grievous” (KJV) or “burdensome” (ESV) to the believer in Christ is that the believer is born of God, and whoever has been born of God overcomes the world!* That is the logic of our text.

Robert Candlish likewise writes:

“The fact (ver. 4) that “whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world,” is given apparently as the reason why to such a one (ver. 3) “the commandments of God are not grievous.” The world, therefore, it might seem, must be characterized by an impression or feeling to the opposite effect; - that the commandments of God are grievous. Wherever that impression or feeling prevails, that is the world.”⁵

And so Candlish goes on to apply to our lives as believers in the following way: “What is the world to you? It is whatever, it is whoever, is apt to make you feel God's commandments are grievous.”⁶

As always, we must be careful to define our terms. We must have an idea of what **“the world”** is that John is referring to if we are to rightly understand what victory over it looks like. The world, then, is anything that is opposed to God, His people, His kingdom, and (certainly in this case) *His will and commandments*.

The Apostle Paul speaks of the world in a similar way in Romans 12:1-2. There he exhorts us:

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*”

First, our grateful response to **“the mercies of God”** in our salvation in Christ is to consist in *not being “conformed to this world.”* Instead, we are to **‘be transformed by the renewal of our minds.’** And what does that transformation look like? It involves coming to *know and do God's will* more and more, and to see it, *not* as grievous or burdensome, but as that which is **“good and acceptable and perfect.”**

In many ways John and Paul are saying the exact same thing.

The Victors Over the World

The second thing we want to look at in our text is not just the victory over the world, but *the identity of the victors over the world*. Who is it that has this victory and is being called to walk in it? It is believers, and not just a special group of super Christians, but all of us. In v.4-5 John writes:

“For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except *the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*”

4 Ibid

5 *1 John* (Geneva Series of Commentaries), p.448

6 Ibid, p.449

Who is it that overcomes (*present tense* – in the here & now) the world? John tells us it is **“everyone has has been born of God”** (v.4). Everyone – *every* believer in Christ. Because every believer has been born of God by the work of the Holy Spirit.

And so if *you* are a believer in Jesus Christ, you *will* overcome the world, and are *even now* in the process of overcoming the world – even if it doesn't always feel like that is the case.

All of this flies in the face of the false teaching of the early Gnostics that were disturbing the church in John's day. They no doubt promised victory over the world, but their victory was a *counterfeit*, a kind of philosophical escapism from the material world, that often ended up with its adherents living very much in conformity to the world, engaging in all manner of sin and vice.

Not only that, but the Gnostics (as most cults still do today) played on the pride and ego of their listeners - they promised their so-called victory only to the exceptional – only to those who were initiated into their secret, higher knowledge.

Not so with the true Christian faith that has once for all been delivered to the saints! In Christ the victory is for every believer – whether young or old, great or small. And so that means *you* if you are a believer!

Are *you* a believer? If so, you have been born of God. And if you have been born of God (as John tells us in v.4), then *you too* **'overcome the world.'** Victory over the world is promised to all who are born again, all those who **'believe that Jesus is the Son of God'** (v.5).

The Means of Victory Over the World

Last but not least, how do we as believers have this victory over the world? How are we to overcome the world? John tells us the means of our victory over the world. Look again at v.4-5:

“For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

What is the means of victory? John tells us that it is **“our faith.”** Notice that when John speaks of our faith being the victory over the world, he speaks of that victory in the *past tense*. He says, **“this is the victory that *has overcome* the world—our faith.”** John Calvin writes:

“This passage is remarkable: for though Satan continually repeats his dreadful and horrible onsets, yet the Spirit of God, declaring that we are beyond the reach of danger, removes fear, and animates us to fight with courage. And the past time is more emphatical than the present or the future; for he says, *that has overcome*, in order that we might feel certain, as though the enemy had been already put to flight. It is, indeed, true, that our warfare continues through life, that our conflicts are daily, nay, that new and various battles are every moment on every side stirred up against us by the enemy; but as God does not arm us only for one day, and as faith is not that of one day, but is the perpetual work of the Holy Spirit, we are already partakers of victory, as though we had already conquered.”⁷

7 *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), p.254–255.

Calvin goes on to say:

“This confidence does not, however, introduce indifference, but renders us always anxiously intent on fighting. For the Lord thus bids his people to be certain, while yet he would not have them to be secure; but on the contrary, he declares that they have already overcome, in order that they may fight more courageously and more strenuously.”⁸

The knowledge that *we have already overcome* in Christ by our faith is to equip and encourage us in the ongoing daily fight to overcome the world, and even that daily overcoming is by faith as well!

F.F. Bruce explains the connection between Christ's past victory and that of all believers:

“By their faith in Jesus as the Son of God they are so united with Him that His victory becomes theirs; they conquer by His power. John has already encouraged his readers, “You are of God, little children, and you have overcome them, because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (4:4).”⁹

There we also see that John has already mentioned our victory over the world, even our victory over those who are of the world in opposition to God.

Matthew Henry likewise puts it well when he tells us, “Faith is the cause of victory, the means, the instrument, the spiritual armour and artillery by which we overcome”¹⁰

And so John tells us that **“everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world.”** (v.4) And *what is the result of that being born again?* Faith! As John told us back in v.1, **“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God”**

Our faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, and is “the consequence, not the cause, of the new birth,” as John Stott puts it. *Because we are born again*, having been brought from death to spiritual life by the work of the Holy Spirit, *we now believe*. And what is the result of that faith? Victory over the world.

And that faith, contrary to the false teaching of the Gnostics, was faith that **“believes that Jesus is the Son of God”** (v.5). John tells us that the false teachers are part of the world that we are to overcome as well. And we overcome them by *believing and holding to the truth of Christ!*

Conclusion

The world is constantly opposing God and His people. It is always seeking to deceive us into seeing God's ways, His will, and His commandments, as grievous or burdensome. And so how are we to overcome the world? By our faith.

Because we have been born of God, we believe in Christ. And by our faith in Him, we overcome the world. For faith is *not* just the *means* to victory, but in some ways *faith is itself the victory!*

⁸ *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), p.255.

⁹ *The Epistles of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Nashville, TN; Bath, England: Kingsley Books, 2018), p.117–118.

¹⁰ *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), p.2452.

And so what are we to do? As Paul tells us in Romans 12:1-2, we are to *not be conformed to this world*, but be transformed by the renewal of our minds. In doing that we will learn more and more to **“discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”**

Spend time in God's Word. Feed your faith on the Scriptures. Grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. And you will be better equipped to *walk by faith*, and to overcome the world.

And what does this look like? Loving God and keeping His commandments – and not seeing them as burdensome, but as your delight! And all to the glory of God. - Amen