

Two Words

1 John 5: 4 Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. *5* Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? *6* This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. *7* For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. *8* And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. *9* If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. *10* He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. *11* And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. *12* He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.

In today's Epistle, I wish to draw our attention to the first verse, and to two key words within it.

The first of these is a word which injects a dynamic note into the ear of the church goer which really should send us all very much into the “discomfort zone” before we dare become too awfully comfortable. It is the word *overcome*, which, as you will notice, is repeated three times in the first verse of our text. It is a word that denotes an active, fighting spirit, one which has exercised itself against opposition, and finally won its way to victory. It is used elsewhere in 1

John:

I write unto you... because ye have overcome the wicked one. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one.” (2:13, 14)

It is worthwhile noting that the word is found again several times in Revelation, that book which is filled with the astonishing story of the warfare which always has raged against the people of God. Observe especially its context, those first few chapters which are addressed specifically to churches. Here are two examples among several:

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. (2:7)

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. (3:21)

In the midst of that grand finale to human history and God's redemptive work told in the very final chapters of the Bible, we find this word once again:

He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son (21:7).

It will do us well to remember the times in which these words were originally penned. They were hardly ones of complacency for those who claimed the name "Christian." The infant church was beset from within by false teaching, and from without by persecutors of all stripes. Under such circumstances, one can hardly imagine that believers were in a position to take their faith for granted. And these believers were pioneers. The faith itself was less than a century old, and they were among its founding members. They could hardly say, "Well, my parents, my grandparents, and my great grandparents pretty much grew up in the church." The only religion they knew was one that required their combined effort, commitment, and sacrifice to maintain.

If you study church history, you invariably discover a cyclic pattern of ups and downs. There are times of relative stasis, which often degenerated into spiritual decline, and even worse. And there are distinct, active, vital periods of reform and revival, characterized by renewed zeal and missionary energy. Decline has sometimes been accompanied with institutionalization, when the church has ceased to be a temple of living stones, as St. Paul called it, and become instead a mere piece of real estate. In such days, it is "church" in name only, no longer the home of the truly faithful, but their actual enemy. It is the sovereign God, the Head of the church, who brings circumstances to pass that will stir up His people to begin once again to actively *overcome*, to fight their way through to victory. Those pressures may occur through persecution, or considerable upheaval, or inevitable change ... whatever necessary means God has sought to employ.

What of today? Contentment can easily in itself be our worst foe: “I’m just where I want to be. I’ve got my hand pretty much steady on the rudder of my life. Don’t be telling me I need more. If things come up, I’ll take care of them in my own, sweet time.” Most of us know in our Christian consciences that such thoughts are dangerous. If we’ve given the lordship of our lives to Christ, He takes us at our word. And our times are hardly static. Things are happening, perhaps faster than we realize. As the currents of the river of change grow swifter, it becomes harder and harder to hold on to those unreliable things we are convinced will keep us from getting swept away, whether comfortable tradition, or time-tested institutions, or cultural icons.

The very safest thing to do is to stay in the battle. The reason is clear. The only rightly ordered life is one that’s lived in the bright light of reality, whether we like the circumstances or not. To carry on in denial may work for a while, but in the end we may not only lose the joy of winning this greatest of all contests to which we have been invited as participants, but endanger our very spiritual growth, as well.

The next word I’d like to look at this morning is *faith: Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.* The key to success in this struggle is *faith*. This is the most important truth that we can take away from today’s lesson. Faith is like a muscle: it increases in strength with exercise. It is like a weapon: practice brings ever increasing skill in its use. So powerful is it that it can confidently defy all of the evidence presented by the senses, turning darkness into light, sorrow into joy, defeat into victory, helplessness into confidence. Faith is no good unless it is tried and tested. Faith thrives on impossibilities: “I’ll never be a strong Christian,” you say. “If you’ll yield to me,” answers faith, “I’ll make you into what you never dared to believe you could be.” “I’m too old to be of much good,” you sigh. “If you’ll let me,” faith replies, “I will turn all of your weakness into virtue. I’ll

erect a temple of wisdom on the ground of your heart which has been cleared off and made level for me by the many years of your toil. All who come to you hereafter will benefit.” “I cannot see how such a haphazard and confused life as mine can possibly glorify God. I am prey to my circumstances: when one thing ends, another begins!” But faith's voice says, “What does the underside of a beautiful woven work look like? Take a look! This is what *you* see, and you despair, but I, who weave, see both the design and the finished item.”

So we must face up. Face up to the fact that the Christian life is one of overcoming. “You can't get to heaven in a rockin' chair...” as that rather annoying song says. Some battles God refuses to win for us. “Go out and fight, and I will be with you.” *To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame.* As soon as we've admitted that we are in an arena of intense conflict, we will immediately and reflexively reach for the only means of help available to us under such circumstances: our faith. It opens the door to the arsenal of spiritual weaponry which God has made available to the willing, brave Christian soldier. It makes spiritual adults out of babes in Christ.

Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?

I know that you do, and so do I.

Do you see how much we have on our side? Do you see what is arrayed against us?

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.