OVERCOME THE WORLD

1 John 5:1–12

Key Verse: 5:4

“…for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.”

John wrote this letter to Christians who were being challenged about their faith. Gnostic teachers were telling them that Jesus really wasn’t the Christ. These Gnostics were acting like they knew better than everybody else, even though their own lives were marked by hypocrisy. And they’d left the Christian fellowship with bitterness and broken relationships. John wanted believers to have assurance of themselves in God, to hold onto the truth about Jesus, and to have discernment about who’s a real Christian. In today’s passage John sums up three identity tests he's been using. He tells us on what basis we can believe in Jesus. Most of all, he tells us that believers are overcomers. In this study we want to learn what it is we need to overcome, and how we can be overcomers. May God speak to us personally through his living word today.

Let’s read verses 1–5. In these verses we see again the three identity tests John has been using to help Christians discern who is who. The three criteria that determine a true Christian are: believing, loving and obeying. We need to believe in Jesus; we need to love God and our brothers and sisters; and we need to obey God’s commands. Also, believing, loving and obeying are all closely related. If we believe, we love, and if we love, we obey. And it goes the other way, too; if we obey, it’s evidence that we love, and if we love, it’s evidence that we believe. And notice that believing in Jesus is mentioned both in verse 1 and in verse 5. We are to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

But it’s good to look at these five verses individually also. Let’s read verse 1. An important phrase here is “born of God.” Three times John has already mentioned being born of God (2:29; 3:9; 4:7). Born of God means spiritual rebirth. In John 3 Jesus told Nicodemus, “You must be born again” (3:3,5,7). What does it mean? It means to really repent of our sins, really put our trust in Jesus, and really let the Holy Spirit work in us to change us. Being born of God is not something we inherit automatically from Christian parents, nor is it something we decide to do with our willpower, nor can anybody else make it happen to us. It’s an amazing miracle God himself does in us (Jn1:12,13). To be born of God means to be changed. As John has taught in this letter, when we’re born of God, we do what is righteous (2:29). When we’re born of God, we can’t go on sinning (3:9). When we’re born of God, we love the way God loves (4:7).

Let’s read verse 1 again. According to this verse, when we’re born of God, we love our Father God, and from that love, we also love our Christian brothers and sisters. We love them not because we think they’re cool, or because we naturally get along, or because we’re of the same culture or race, but simply because they are precious children of God through faith in Jesus. We love fellow Christians as our very own dear family members. Loving fellow believers is a sign of being born of God.

Let’s read verse 2. In this letter John already has taught strongly about loving fellow believers. When we love Christian brothers and sisters, we live in the light, and there’s nothing in us to make us stumble (2:10). If we don’t love one another, we remain in death (3:14). We should lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters, and if we don’t share our material possessions with fellow Christians in need, the love of God is not in us (3:16,17). We should love not with words or speech but with actions and in truth (3:18). If we don’t love, we don’t know God (4:8). If we hate a Christian brother or sister and yet claim to love God, we’re a liar (4:20). After all these challenges, some people may wonder whether they really love their Christian brothers and sisters or not. Others may be wondering what real love is. So John writes here to both comfort and teach. Read verse 2 again. Real love for fellow Christians starts with loving God. When we love God, it’s the best way to love others, because it leads people to God, not to ourselves.

To emphasize this point, John goes on. Read verse 3. John says true love for God is shown in obedience to his commands. If we don’t keep God’s commands, our seeming love for God is actually nothing but self-deceiving emotionalism. On the other hand, when we keep God’s commands, we give a good spiritual influence to our fellow Christians. But keeping God’s commands is related to loving others in another way, too. John has said before that obeying God’s word makes God’s love truly “complete” in us (2:5). And John has been saying repeatedly that God’s main command is to love one another (2:7–11; 3:11; 4:7,21). So, as we strive to love God and obey his commands, it naturally follows that we’ll experience his love deeper and deeper, and love our fellow Christians more and more.

Let’s read the last part of verse 3. “And his commands are not burdensome…” Why does John suddenly say this? Partly it’s because we all tend to bristle when somebody commands us to do something; we naturally get rebellious. Moreover, God’s commands can seem burdensome because what they demand of us is so high. It seems burdensome always to have to love fellow Christians, especially when we have to love them the way God does. John is saying: To those *not* born of God, God’s commands *are* burdensome. But to those who *are* born of God, God’s commands are *not* burdensome.

Why? Let’s read verse 4. John again comes back to his teaching on being born of God. It’s the secret of being different. It’s the secret of believing, obeying and loving. Here John uses the word “overcomes.” When we’re born of God, we overcome. What is it that we overcome? As John has been saying, first of all we overcome feeling burdened by God’s commands. We overcome our limitations in loving fellow Christians. But here John takes it all the way: he repeatedly says we overcome “the world.”

What does he mean? In chapter 2 he told young men that they have “overcome the evil one” (2:13,14). In chapter 4 he said that we overcome “them,” referring to spirit of the antichrist that is in the world (4:4). Now he says we overcome “the world.” Later in verse 19 he says that “the whole world is under the control of the evil one.” So, to overcome the world means to overcome the devil, his temptations, deceptions and attacks. To overcome the world also means to overcome the world’s hostility to Jesus and his followers. To overcome the world means to overcome all the hardships and persecutions the devil uses to try to get us to give up following Jesus.

In the context of 4:20–5:2, to overcome also seems to mean to overcome the difficulties involved in loving fellow Christians. As we live in a world where people sin freely, love, Jesus said, “grows cold” (Mt24:12). To overcome the world means to overcome its loveless, heartless influence and keep on loving our Christian brothers and sisters fervently and dearly.

To overcome the world has another meaning as well. Back in 2:15,16 John taught us not to love the world or anything in the world. There, he defined the world as “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” The world represents pleasure, vanity and pride. It reminds us of some present-day reality TV shows. Lust, vanity and pride are always trying to capture our hearts and minds. Sadly, some Christians get ensnared in them, and when they do, their love for God and for one another grows cold. When it’s “me against the world,” it can seem like the ultimate David-and-Goliath battle, where the odds are stacked against us, and it seems we’re way too weak, and sure to fail.

How can we get out from under the world’s powerful sway? Let’s read verse 4 again. Any Christian can gain the victory to overcome the world through faith in Jesus. John says “even our faith.” Faith in Jesus can seem as small as a mustard seed, but faith in Jesus is not at all weak; it’s powerful, more powerful than the whole world. Faith in Jesus enables us to overcome the world. Faith in Jesus enables us to live in the world, but not be of the world. Faith in Jesus gives us inner strength to resist the world’s temptations, pressures and influences. The early church was facing many threats—heresies, persecutions and worldly influence. But John assured his readers that they’d already overcome the world through faith. Our faith enables us to do the same.

Read verse 5. Here John emphasizes what the content of overcoming faith is. It's to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. As we’ve seen, this means to believe that Jesus is the Christ (cf. 2:22). It means to believe that Jesus came in the flesh, became fully human just like us, and to believe that he's the Savior of the world and divine Son of God (4:2,14,15). When we believe rightly about Jesus, we overcome the world. How important the truth about Jesus is! How important to know and believe who Jesus really is! When we truly believe in Jesus, we overcome the world. Just before his arrest Jesus told his disciples, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (Jn16:33). Believing in Jesus means sharing the victory he won over the world and the devil through his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven.

Since believing in Jesus is so important, John gives us a basis to believe. Read verses 6–8. Here there are three testimonies God has given us about Jesus: “water,” “blood” and “the Spirit.” Water refers to Jesus’ baptism, when the Spirit came on him like a dove (Jn1:31–33). Blood refers to Jesus’ blood shed on the cross for our sin (1:7; 4:10; cf. Ro3:25a). The Spirit helps us see that Jesus’ baptism by the Spirit and death on the cross make him our true Messiah and Savior (Jn14:17; 16:13). Gnostic heretics were saying that before his baptism, Jesus was just a man, and just before he went to the cross, the Spirit left him, and he was just a man again. So John says Jesus “came” by water and blood, meaning he was the Son of God and Christ the Savior both during his baptism and during his death on the cross. This is not a human testimony, but God’s testimony, through the Holy Spirit giving us inner conviction of the truth (9–11). What is John’s conclusion? Read verses 11–12. God gives us life through his Son Jesus. It’s eternal life, which we have even now, and which we’ll enjoy into eternity. It’s knowing the only true God, and Jesus Christ, his Son, whom he sent into the world (Jn17:5).

Today we learned that we have the assurance that we’re born of God through faith in Jesus, and through this faith, we overcome the world. Whatever problems or temptations we may be facing, whatever challenges within or without, may God renew our conviction that through faith in Jesus we overcome the world. May God help us believe rightly about Jesus and experience the power of real faith in him, faith that gives us spiritual victory.