

**“Who Is It That Overcomes the World?” (1 John 5:1–5)**

**July 16, 2017**

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*We shall overcome,  
We shall overcome,  
We shall overcome some day.  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe  
We shall overcome some day.*

We all have challenges or problems that we want to overcome. But how we do that?

When I was younger, I used to think I could overcome most challenges through strength, through trying harder. I remember one time, fifteen years ago, when I felt like I had failed. I was a graduate student, studying music, and I was singing in an opera. We performed this opera five times over two weekends. During the first weekend, I didn't sing well. I was feeling a little sick. And on the Sunday night performance, I was struggling. Instead of going up for a climactic high note, I sang the note an octave lower, in a very anticlimactic fashion. I was so angry that right after the curtain calls, when we took our bows, I immediately changed out my costume and washed off my makeup, instead of staying around to talk to audience members who came backstage after the show. I went straight to the gym and lifted weights. Then, when I got home, I watched the movie *Raging Bull*. I don't remember why I watched it then, but the story of a boxer seemed to resonate with me. I could have watched one of the Rocky movies and it would have had the same effect. In my mind, I had been knocked to the canvas. Now I needed to get up and try harder. And that's what I did.

That may not seem like a grand story of overcoming—it's not—but it captures how the world tells us to overcome. We hear messages like, “Work harder! Try harder! Work smarter! Believe in yourself! Keep going!” In one of the later Rocky movies, *Rocky Balboa*, Rocky tells his son, “Nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard you're hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward, how much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done!” In this way of overcoming, the object of faith is the self. “You can do it!” But what if you can't? What if you get hit and can't get back up? What if you can't move forward? How do you overcome, then?

Of course, that has to do with personal problems. What about the world's problems? A lot of people think “we shall overcome” through our mastery of the world, through science,

through the inevitability of human progress. I've been reading a book that examines different modern worldviews, the ways that many people today look at the world. One of those worldviews is called the "classical modern worldview." This way of looking at the world doesn't really pay much attention to God, if it pays any attention to him at all. In other words, it's a secular way of looking at the world. The world is like a machine, one governed by natural laws. And we can master this machine and tune it to run the way we want it. The authors of this book write, "The classical modern attitude is that for humankind to realize progress, we must dominate nature and overcome all of its restraints. Nature is the material from which human progress is derived; it is in overcoming the barriers imposed by nature that progress is born."<sup>1</sup>

Many people today assume that we can fix the world's problems through science and technology. How do we overcome? By "dominating nature," by "overcoming the barriers imposed by nature." We will overcome by curing diseases, by tinkering with our genetic codes, through surgeries and medicines, through improved technologies that transform the way we travel, do business, prepare food, take care of our bodies, and live our whole lives. Just give us enough time, and we may even conquer death itself. In this way of overcoming, the object of faith is humanity. "We can do it!"

But is there any reason to believe that we can solve all our problems? Yes, we've come a long, long way with technology, particularly travel, computers, and medicine. But each new technology introduces new problems, and we are still left with the same, universal human problems of hate, jealousy, greed, fighting, loneliness, depression, war, divorce, murder, aging, and death. Just because we have mastered some problems doesn't guarantee we could ever master them all. In a world where we make as many problems as we solve, and where we can never master the human heart, how can we overcome?

The Bible speaks very differently about overcoming. It tells us that we can overcome, but not through our strength or intelligence. We can overcome, but not through being clever or creative or mastering the elements of nature. We overcome by knowing the one who has overcome the world. We'll see that in today's passage, 1 John 5:1-5.

If you haven't been with us over the past three months, we've been studying a book of the Bible called 1 John. It's a letter written by one of Jesus' disciples named John. He was one of

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Goudzwaard and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Beyond the Modern Age: An Archaeology of Contemporary Culture* (Downers Grove, IL IVP Academic, 2017), 35.

the men who followed Jesus during his years of ministry on earth, who saw Jesus die on the cross, and who saw Jesus risen from the grave. He was one of the men commissioned by Jesus to go out into the world and tell others the good news about who Jesus is and what he has done for us.

John wrote this letter to Christians in churches in the Roman Empire, probably in a province called Asia Minor, which is now western Turkey. These Christians might have felt overcome because there were a number of people who left their churches and started teaching very different things about Jesus. John wanted to reassure them that what they heard when they first believed is the truth. John has many things to say about Jesus and what it means to follow him.

These Christians might have felt overcome because of their circumstances living in the Roman Empire. Until the year 313, over two hundred years after John wrote this letter, Christianity was not a legal religion. To be a Christian in the Roman Empire was to risk alienation and even persecution. John wanted to encourage these Christians that though they might have difficulties in this world, they could ultimately be overcomers. He wanted them to remain strong in the faith.

Without further ado, let's read today's passage. Here is 1 John 5:1–5:

<sup>1</sup> Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. <sup>2</sup> By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. <sup>3</sup> For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. <sup>4</sup> For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this letter, John says that people who have been “born of God,” people who have been transformed by God and are now his children, do three things. First, they love. In 1 John 4:7, John writes, “whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.” People who have been changed by God, who have been “born again” (John 3:3, 7), love. They love God and they love other people, particularly others who also have been born of God. When John says that people love and know God, it means that they have a right relationship with God. They are

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

united to God because they are united to his Son, Jesus. And that leads us to the second thing John says of Christians: they believe. Specifically, they believe that “Jesus is the Christ.” The word “Christ” isn’t Jesus’ last name. It’s an anglicized version of a Greek word that means “the anointed one.” It’s the same as saying “Messiah,” which is an anglicized version of a Hebrew word that also means “anointed one.” In John’s letter, “Christ” basically means “the Son of God.” Jesus is the anointed King (5:1), God’s Son (5:5), and also God himself (5:20). He is the righteous one, our advocate (2:1). Jesus has eternally existed as the Son of God, but at one point in human history he came “in the flesh” (4:2) by becoming a man. He lived the perfect human life. He always obeyed God the Father. He always lived for God. He loved God and other people perfectly. As John says, “You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin” (3:5). Jesus took away the sins of his people when he became the “propitiation for our sins” (2:2; 4:10). That means that he wiped away the sins of everyone who comes to know him, love him, trust him, and obey him. That means that he makes God “propitious,” or favorable, to those who come to Jesus. Jesus did that by dying on the cross (hinted at in 5:6), when he willingly took on the wrath of God, the penalty for our sins. He didn’t die for his own sins, because he never committed any. But he died in place of sinners. We deserve judgment because we corrupt God’s good creation. We don’t live life the way he designed it to be. God has every right to remove us from his creation, to condemn us, but instead he sent his Son into the world to be condemned in place of every sinner who trusts Jesus.

This salvation from sin and condemnation is a gift. Notice that John says, in verse 1, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.” That means that everyone who has faith in Jesus *has already been* born of God.<sup>3</sup> This is a truth that the Bible is quite clear about, one that we don’t want to skip over because it bothers some people. In order to believe in Jesus, we must first be born again by God. Jesus said that no one can even see the kingdom of God, much less enter it, without being born again (John 3:3–8). And we don’t cause ourselves to be born again. We are not saved by our wisdom, by our ability to make the wise choice of believing in Jesus. If that were the case, faith itself would be a work. But it’s not. Faith is itself a gift. That’s what Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8–9:

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<sup>3</sup> “In Johannine theology, spiritual rebirth seems to precede and ultimately create faith: those who believe do so not so much as the result of human volition as of prior divine intention.” Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 270.

<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

If our faith wasn't something granted to us (cf. Phil. 1:29), then we could boast about our faith. But even our faith is a gift. So, we can't boast.

Of course, in our experience, it seems like we do choose to trust God. But the fact that we are children of God is due to God's will, not ours. That's what John writes in his Gospel. He says that "all who did receive [Jesus], who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, *not of blood* [we're not naturally or biologically children of God], *nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man* [it's ultimately not our decision], *but of God* [he chose us and changed us, giving us the gift of faith]" (John 1:12–13).

That means that salvation is a gift. We don't earn it. But once we have been changed by God, there will be some evidence of that change. The marks of loving God and loving his people will be evident in our lives. We will believe what the Bible says about God, including very specifically what the Bible says about Jesus. If we love God, we'll trust that his word is good and that his commandments are good. Look again at verses 2 and 3 of chapter 5: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome." How do we know that we really love God's children? We love God. How do we know we love God? We obey his commandments. And the good news is that his commandments are not burdensome. The third thing that Christians do is obey God. They love God and others, particularly Christians; they believe in Jesus; and they obey God.

Let's back up a step. Last week I said that love isn't really an emotion. It's an action. Or, to put it a different way, love is a disposition of the heart that results in actions. When we say we love God, we should act in ways that show we love God. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15; cf. vv. 21, 23). He didn't say, "If you obey me, I'll love you," or, "If you obey, then I'll give you the right to be called children of God." No, as I've already said, God first saves us. But then we're expected to act as if we've been changed. The way that we show God we love him is that we obey his commands. And he has saved us to do good works.

Earlier, I read Ephesians 2:8–9, which say that we are saved by grace through faith, which is itself a gift. Here's verse 10: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for

good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” God saved us because he loves us. But he expects us then to live as his obedient children, carrying out the works that he has already prepared for us in advance.

And these works are not burdensome. That doesn’t mean they aren’t hard. But they aren’t a burden to us. Think about it this way: Think back to the time when you first fell in love. Say you learn that the object of your affections loves a particular flower, or a particular food, or perhaps jewelry. It doesn’t much matter what it is. Let’s just say it’s expensive or that it’s hard to acquire. But you know that if you buy this cherished object for your love, he or she will be pleased. When you’re in love, don’t you do that sort of thing without complaining? It may require work or sacrifice, but you don’t feel like it’s a burden. Why? Because you *want* to do it. In the same way, we should *want* to do what God asks us to do. And God doesn’t ask us to do the impossible. He doesn’t ask us to save ourselves. He doesn’t ask us to overcome our real enemies, such as sin, death, and the devil. He asks us to come to him, to trust him, and to do what he says.

Jesus once said,

<sup>28</sup> Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28–30).

Jesus asks to come under his yoke, to serve him and to be connected to him, but his yoke is easy. He doesn’t ask us to do the impossible. The reason he doesn’t ask us to do the impossible, to overcome all our problems and all the world’s problems, is because he does that for us.

Look again at verses 4 and 5 of 1 John 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?” Why are God’s commandments not burdensome? Because those who have been born of God overcome the world. And what is the victory that overcomes the world? Our faith.

What does this mean? Well, let’s first think about what “the world” means. Here, it means the whole system of people and evil forces opposed to God. The “world” does not recognize God. They don’t acknowledge that he’s King. They don’t believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that he is Lord. The “world” is opposed to God and his people. Rocky Balboa said that “life” hits hard. John would say it’s the “world” that hits hard. And the world would overcome us

if it weren't for Jesus. In fact, because John's reader were Christians, the "world" was going to hit them hard.

In the Roman Empire, to worship Jesus as Lord meant you couldn't worship the Emperor as Lord. Strange as it might seem, the Caesar was worshiped. And there were many false gods that were worshiped in the Roman Empire. Every city had its own god or goddess. For example, in the city of Ephesus, where John lived later in his life and roughly where these churches he was writing to were located, the goddess of the city was Artemis. The temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The apostle Paul got into trouble in Ephesus because he had persuaded people to turn from false gods to the true God. This meant that new Christians stopped worshiping Artemis, which meant they stopped buying little silver replicas of her temple. Because selling these silver shrines was a significant business, one which suffered because of the growth of Christianity, those who made these shrines weren't happy. They started a riot in the city (Acts 19:21–41). Though Paul was able to escape this scene unharmed, if you were a Christian in the Roman Empire, you might suffer in various ways. You may be rejected by friends and family. Your business might suffer. You could be ostracized from the community. Some Christians died for the faith, so persecution was a real threat. This kind of world might seem like it would overcome a Christian.

Yet John says Christians are overcomers. So, let's take some time to talk about "overcoming." How is this possible? Earlier in the letter, John has told us that "young men . . . have overcome the evil one" (2:13–14). He has said that believers "have overcome" the false teachers and false spirits (4:4). But John doesn't tell us how. In another book that John wrote, the book of Revelation, he talks of those who "conquer," which is actually a translation of the same Greek word translated here as "overcome."<sup>4</sup> But it seems that in John's works, there are only a few places that actually say *how* Christians overcome. In John's Gospel, Jesus told his disciples, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). So, that must mean that Christians overcome the world because Jesus has overcome the world. But how does Jesus overcome the world?

I think there are two ways that Jesus overcomes, and they are related to his two comings. At his first coming, he overcame the world by taking on the sin of the world and having that sin crushed. In other words, Jesus took our sin upon himself and he received God's wrath for sin.

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<sup>4</sup> νικάω (*nikaō*). See Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21.

And that death, along with his resurrection from the grave on the third day, shattered Satan's plans. Those who are united to Jesus by faith, which entails love and obedience, no longer fear judgment (1 John 4:17–18) or death (Heb. 2:14–15). Satan thought he had conquered Jesus by conspiring to have him killed, but he didn't realize that it was Jesus' plan. He didn't realize what Jesus' death would achieve. He didn't know that Jesus would rise triumphantly from the grave.

The reason I say that Jesus conquers or overcomes through his death is because of what we read in Revelation 12:11. There, we're told that Christians "have conquered [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." We don't conquer evil through our own works. We conquer through Jesus' death on the cross, through the gospel.

At Jesus' second coming, when he comes in glory to judge the living and the dead and to restore the world, to remake it into a paradise, he will completely and ultimately overcome the world. This time, he won't triumph by laying down his life. In Revelation, we're told that "the Lamb [Jesus] will conquer" the powers against him, "for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful" (Rev. 17:14). The book of Revelation pictures Jesus' final victory in different ways. One is as a rider on a white horse, putting an end to his enemies through his sword, which is actually his words (Rev. 19:11–16). In other words, Jesus will slay his enemies with his word of judgment. When Jesus comes again, he will make everything right. Ultimately, every injustice will be paid for, every crime will require a sentence. If we believe in Jesus, our sins, our injustices against God, were paid for at the cross. If we reject Jesus, we will pay for our sins for all eternity, by being cast out of God's good creation, completely removed from his presence and from everything good.

So, we don't really overcome. Not by ourselves. We overcome because Jesus overcomes. The apostle Paul says, "in all these things we are more than conquerors *through* him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37). Did any of you watch the last Super Bowl? When the Patriots pulled out that amazing come-from-behind victory, did any of you say, "We won!"? Well, of course *we* didn't win. We didn't actually play the game. But the Patriots played for New England, and they won, and we are victors through their victory. That's what it's like with Jesus and his victory on our behalf. Except that Christians have a real, deep, unbreakable union with Jesus, whereas sports fans can be fickle. And we receive all the benefits from Jesus. Patriots fans don't receive Super Bowl rings, but Christians will receive crowns and thrones.



The last word we want to think carefully about is “faith.” John says, in verse 4, that the victory that has overcome the world is “our faith.” Perhaps in a world that is opposed to God, believing in the Son of God is a victory. But, as we have seen, faith is a gift. And we’re not saved by our faith. We’re saved by Jesus and the gracious gift of our salvation. The instrument through which we experience that salvation is faith. That’s how we appropriate or receive that salvation. What really matters is not the strength of our faith—again, we can’t boast about our faith. What really matters is the *object* of our faith, Jesus. John doesn’t mean that anyone who “has faith” in some generic way is a victor. No, the one who overcomes “believes that Jesus is the Son of God” (v. 5). Our faith must have a certain content. In short, we must believe what the Bible says about Jesus, that he is the God-man who died to take away our sins, and who rose from the grave for our justification (Rom. 4:25). If we’re united to Jesus, we’ll know facts about him and believe that they’re true and that they’re life-changing.

But faith is more than knowing facts to be true. Faith is trust. Yes, we trust facts about Jesus to be true, but more importantly, we trust the person of Jesus. We trust that Jesus is who the Bible says he is. We trust that he did what the Bible said he did. We trust that his perfect, sinless life is credited to us when we have a relationship with him. We trust that his death on the cross paid for all our sins. We trust that he will overcome all evil for us. We trust that he will take care of all our problems, even if he doesn’t remove all of them immediately. We cannot be who Jesus is. We are not perfect. We cannot do what Jesus did, remove our own sins and rise triumphantly from the dead in a body that can never die. We need Jesus to do that for us. We need Jesus to slay the dragon, to destroy the giant, to wipe out our enemies. We can only receive the benefits of his work by trusting him. We trust him and his ability to do what seems impossible.

Think of the many times in the Old Testament when God did what seemed to be impossible for the people of Israel. He brought them out of slavery in Egypt, which was the superpower of the world at that time. The Israelites didn’t defeat Pharaoh and his army. No, first God visited several destructive plagues on the land of Egypt. During that last plague, God did something that forced Pharaoh’s hand: he had all the firstborn in the land die. The Israelites would have had their firstborn die, too, if they didn’t do something. They had to sacrifice lambs and put some of the blood on their doors. The idea is that the lamb was dying in their place. The blood of the lamb covered their sins so that God “passed over” their homes and didn’t take their

firstborn in judgment. The Israelites didn't free themselves. Sacrificing the lambs didn't do that. God judged the Egyptians and God spared the Israelites. But the Israelites trusted God and did what he said.<sup>5</sup>

I once saw a video of Don Carson, a great theologian, talk about what these Israelites might have experienced on the night of the Passover.<sup>6</sup> He imagines two Israelites talking about what would happen that night. One is confident but the other is doubtful and anxious. But, in faith, the anxious one put the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and the lintel. He still had some reservations and some fear, but he did what he was told. The other Israelite is more confident. He says, "Bring it on. I trust the promises of God." But both trust God enough to obey and they put the blood of lambs outside their homes, and because they have that faith, they receive the benefits of God's grace. So it is with us. It's not the intensity of our faith, it's not the intensity of our emotions, that counts. Do we trust Jesus enough to give our lives over to him, even if we have some doubts, even if we are scared? Do we trust that *he* and *he alone* will overcome our problems?

Trusting in Jesus is a bit like having faith in a pilot's ability to fly a plane that will bring you to your destination. Some of us may love flying and some of us may hate it. Some of us may know a lot about aviation and some of us may not know anything about how a plane works. But if we trust the pilot, the airline, and the plane's ability, we get on the plane. That is the faith that we need.

Similarly, some of us may be afraid of surgery. Some of us may not be so afraid. Some of us work or have worked in the medical field. Some of us know hardly anything about biology. But if we trust the surgeon, we will have surgery, even though we may be nervous and afraid.

So it is with Jesus, the great Physician and the Captain and Pilot of our souls. We may not have all our questions answered. We may not know everything we would like to know about Jesus. We may have some fears or some lingering doubts. But the question is, do you trust Jesus enough to turn your life over to him? If you understand that he came to overcome your problems by taking them on his shoulders, you should trust him. You should want to obey him. You should love him. If you understand that you stand guilty before a holy God who knows everything you've ever done wrong, every action and thought and desire of which you are ashamed, and if

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<sup>5</sup> The Passover is recounted in Exodus 12.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJRz5fLCmM8>.

you understand that Jesus came to take that shame upon himself, and to pay the penalty for all those wrongs, how can you *not* trust him? How can you not love him? How can you not want to live for him, to obey him and please him?

The problems of our lives may seem impossible. We may feel the Israelites, with our backs to the Red Sea (Exod. 14). God doesn't promise us that we won't face pain, that we won't experience real loss in this life. He simply asks us to follow his Son. He doesn't tell us what exactly that journey will look like for us in advance, but he promises us that he will be with us and he will never leave nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5; Josh. 1:5). The Israelites were told to walk through the Red Sea, which had miraculously parted. I imagine some of them were frightened, wondering if the water would come back to its normal position as they walked. But they had enough faith to walk. And after they had crossed, God caused the water to swallow up their enemies, Pharaoh's army. And what did Moses and the Israelites sing on the other side? "The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation" (Exod. 15:2).

This means that we don't have to overcome our problems, because Jesus overcomes them for us. No one else can do this. There will be no utopia prior to Jesus' second coming. Technology will not fix our greatest problems, our infected hearts, our cancerous sins, and our diseased souls. No government will solve all our problems. In fact, when governments try to create paradises on earth they usually create hells instead. Only Jesus can do these things. If you don't trust Jesus yet, I urge you to turn to him. Please. You will not always have the time. If you want to talk about this personally, I would love to do that.

The fact that Jesus fights our battles for us doesn't mean we don't work. Jesus wants us to work. But we don't work *for* our salvation. We work *because* of our salvation. Because we have the Holy Spirit inside of us to empower us to do the works that God has prepared in advance for us, we can work confidently, knowing that it is God's will for us to obey him. And his commandments are not burdensome. God will work through us, even through our weaknesses. And God never asks us to do the impossible, because he has already done the impossible for us. "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26).

If you're struggling with challenges and problems today, I can't tell you how those issues will play out in this life. You may have painful times ahead of you and real struggles. In this world, we'll have tribulation. But if you're a Christian, those problems you face will not be the end of the story. Take heart, for Jesus has overcome the world.