

1 John 5:4-5

We Are Overcomers

Introduction

During the days of the great evangelist D. L. Moody in the 1800s, there arose another man of fine achievements in America—Horatio Spafford. He was a very successful lawyer in Chicago.

One time, Spafford planned a European trip for his family for the benefit of his wife's health. Due to some last-minute developments, he had to remain behind. But he sent off his wife and four daughters as scheduled. He had expected himself to follow later. However, the unexpected struck.

The ship that his wife and daughters had boarded collided with another ship and sank within minutes. Mrs. Spafford was saved, but all her four daughters drowned. When the survivors were sent to Cardiff in Wales, Mrs. Spafford cabled her husband in two words—"Saved alone".

Spafford left shortly by ship to meet his wife. He passed by the scene of the tragedy—the place where he lost all his four daughters within minutes; the place where a cruel event took away 2/3 of his family in a flash.

At that moment, Spafford paused and wrote a hymn. Part of it reads like this:

When peace like a river attendeth my way
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say
"It is well, it is well, with my soul."

This hymn is familiar to many of us. We still sing it today. It is a hymn that's filled with such a strong sense of faith and belief in God. Its words reveal the faith and belief of one who is not overwhelmed by the storms of life, but who has overcome the storms of life. It was written at a time when the one who wrote it was going through perhaps the darkest hours of his life.

What is the secret of being an overcomer as a Christian regardless of life's circumstances in the world we live in? John asserts in 1 John 5:1-5 that the one born of God (i.e. the Christian) bears on him three marks of authentic faith:

- One, the belief in Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God (vv. 1, 5).
- Two, the obedience to the commands of God out of love (vv. 2, 3).

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- Three, the overcoming of the influences of the world in his life (vv. 4, 5).

Today, we want to focus on just the third mark of authentic faith—i.e. the overcoming of the influences of the world in 1 John 5:4-5. In fact, the overarching theme in this 1st letter of John is love. When we are born of God, the commands are for us to love the Lord and love one another in the Body. When we grow in such love, our love for the world fades away. We grow to become overcomers of the world.

As we reflect on 1 John 5:4-5 today, there are three implications we can draw out to help us live as overcomers in this world.

The first implication has to do with ...

I. A fact we have to accept (v. 4a)

What is this fact we have to accept? John says in v. 4a, "... for everyone born of God overcomes the world." The word "overcomes" implies that a real conflict is going on. There is something that is trying to obstruct you from living out the Christian life as God has intended for you. And you have to overcome that adversity in order to live out that life.

John is telling those who are born of God—Christians like you and me—that we are to overcome. We are to overcome obstacles that try to prevent us from living out the life that God has intended for us.

Hence, the fact for us to accept is this—Christians are not spared from adversities in this world. God does not promise Christians, even faithful Christians, fair weather all the time.

Now, God's people in Bible times were no strangers to adversities and rough weathers as they tried to live faithfully for God:

- The Israelites suffered the hardship of slavery in Egypt.
- Daniel in exile was thrown to the lions.
- John the Baptist was beheaded by the evil King Herod.
- Stephen was stoned to death by the Jews.
- Paul was imprisoned by the Romans.
- The early church in Jerusalem was stricken by famine.
- Jesus Himself was crucified on the cross.

How real are these adversities in our lives today? Well, those that I have just mentioned may be totally alien to us. We live with a good degree of freedom. We do not face the sword and are not martyred for our faith—our problem is not dying for Jesus, but how to live well for Him. We live in an affluent land of good opportunities in spite of the economic ills today. We have enough to

feed ourselves—our problem is not with malnutrition, but with obesity. We have more than enough to meet our basic needs.

But in spite of these good things we enjoy, we know that we are not sheltered from adversities in this world. In our success-oriented society, our adversities come in different forms. One adversity that is very real to many of us is the fear of failure. The word “failure” is taboo to us because it means:

- We are not good enough.
- We cannot meet up to others’ or even our own expectations.
- We cannot beat others to secure that promotion.
- We have to be retrenched as the economy restructures itself.
- We cannot bring in greater profits from our business ventures.
- We cannot put our children in the best schools.
- We cannot be as active as before because of sickness.
- We cannot live happily ever after with our spouses because of marital conflict.

The fear of failure is one very real adversity that many Christians need to overcome in this realistic world. Since it is a fact that we are not spared from adversities in this world, the right approach is not to deny them, but to face them in such a way as to allow God to use them to mould us.

And to allow God to use failure to mould us is to ask Him help us persevere. In Greek, the word “persevere” literally means “remain under”. It pictures a weightlifter staying under a heavy load without losing balance. It is the power to stay on, not to run away. It is not giving in or giving up. It is not quitting, but bouncing back. It is not allowing setbacks to make us sit back with numbed resignation, but fight back with new resolve.

Yes, you and I may have our failures in life. Yet, the Bible in passages like James 1:14 exhorts us to persevere because God in Jesus Christ has already started to work in and through us. God is working in and through us not that we are to hit instant perfection, but to grow unto Christlikeness through all circumstances, even failures. Our failures are never too damaging for God to do anything redemptive. And our greatest failure is to believe that just because we have failed, God does not want or allow us to try again; to make a fresh start.

Indeed, Christians, even godly and faithful Christians, are not spared from adversities in this fallen world. So we need to ask God for that boldness to persevere. And boldness is not the absence of fear, but the presence of faith. It is the presence of faith to believe God enough to try again; to make a fresh start—perhaps not in the old and errant way, but in one guided by a new awareness of God’s will for us.

Well-known pastor, Charles Swindoll, once told this story of two men who went mountain trekking. As they were ascending up a steep slope, one man slipped and fell down the cliff.

The other immediately looked down the cliff and shouted, “Are you okay?”

The fallen man replied, “I think my arms are broken.”

The other then reassured, “Don't panic. I am using a rope to pull you up.”

He then threw down a long rope and began to feverishly pull up his friend. But after a short while, he stopped suddenly and asked, “Hey, you say your arms are broken. How are you holding on to the rope?”

His friend replied, “With my teeth!”

Yes, we have to accept the fact that we are not spared from adversities in this world. Life is not meant to be always easy for us. And very often, when such times hit us, the only way to go up is to keep biting our teeth no matter what, and carry on with faith in God and boldness to persevere. When we give up too easily and too soon, we will never see what God can do through our faith in Him and our boldness to persevere for Him.

As we reflect further on 1 John 5:4-5, there is a second implication we can draw out to help us live as overcomers in this world. It has to do with ...

II. A caution we have to heed (v. 4b)

John says in v. 4b, “This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.” It is the overthrowing of an opponent in such a way that all can see it. In a sense, this is like what Paul says in Rom. 8:37—that believers in Jesus Christ are “more than conquerors” or are “super-conquerors”. It is a tremendous victory. It is tremendous not because it is an easy fight. It is tremendous because it is a tough fight against a tough opponent, but at the end of it, you are the one standing as the victor.

It is like the current swimming champion of Singapore swimming against me (one who can only swim like a frog—i.e. the breast stroke). If he beats me by five body lengths, would you call him a “super conqueror” or his win as a “stunning victory”? Very likely you would not. Otherwise, you are complimenting me, not him. But if he swims against the current world champion and beats him by just half a stroke, would you call him a “super conqueror” or his win as a “stunning victory”? Very likely you would because he has swum against a very tough opponent and prevailed over him—even if

the winning margin is only half a stroke. This is the tremendous sense of victory that John is pointing to in v. 4b.

But I wonder how many of us here can claim that we often have a tremendous sense of victory in our Christian living; that we often feel like “super-conquerors” in our Christian life. The fact of life is that many often feel like mere survivors rather than overcomers. So, is John exaggerating a little here in declaring our state of victory? Of course, he is not. But to rightly appreciate this victory that is ours, we have to understand it at two levels.

- Firstly, this victory is not based on faith in what we can do, but faith in what Christ has done. Jesus Christ has taken the sting out of sin by conquering over death—He has risen and is alive today. He is the victor and gives eternal life to all who believe in Him. Hence, we who believe in Jesus Christ share in this irreversible victory of His. At the time when we believe, we begin a new life in Jesus Christ from a position of victory. We do not have to fight for victory over the world.

The world here refers to Satan’s worldwide system of malice and deception that leads one to eternal damnation. We are victors and have overcome the world because our faith in Jesus Christ has moved us from damnation and secured us in salvation. So, John is not exaggerating when he says that our faith is the victory that has overcome the world.

- Secondly, this victory is a convincing one over the challenge of what to love. We have won convincingly not because we have fought an easy fight. Rather, it is because we have fought a tough fight and prevailed. We have won because we have stuck to loving what is right as we face the challenge of what to love. Indeed, the overarching theme of 1 John is about loving God. And we often face the temptations to compromise our love for God. We are often tempted to love the world as well, perhaps even more.

The world promises many alternatives. Through the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, the world tempts us to redirect our love from God to other things. How can we ever be drawn to the world system that opposes God? The answer is because it is often not hostile, but seductive towards us. The result? We become attracted to it and our love for God inevitably is not lost, but lessened or adulterated. It is attractive because it seems to offer us what we want without the demands of obedience and commitment in godly living.

The more a Christian gives his heart to the world, the less he is able to give it to God. Hence, our spiritual victory is really a matter of the heart. When we love the world, we give in to pressures to cheat, to lie, to sexual impurity, to strike back, to be resentful and jealous, to be ambitious and cruel, and to be discontented with God’s provision.

Yes, our spiritual victory is a matter of the heart. It is more than just our external actions. It probes the inner motivations of our hearts. Therein lies a caution we have to heed—a Christian can be his own toughest adversary.

Therefore, the battle does not often begin with the adversities or adversaries out there. Very often, it begins right within us. The toughest battle is not with the world or worldliness out there. The toughest battle is with the world and worldliness right within us. Before we can win the battle out there, we must first win it right here within ourselves.

There may be some bondage and baggage that are holding you back from growing in your faith as a church and as a person. Unless you allow and trust God to deal with them, you remain your worst enemy. You function at best with a survival mentality of mediocrity, not the overcoming mentality of excellence that God has intended for you.

Finally and briefly, a third implication we can draw out from 1 John 5:4-5 to help us live as overcomers in this world has to do with ...

III. A comfort we can rest in (v. 5)

John says in v. 5, “Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” Note also that in v. 4a, he says that the one “born of God overcomes the world”. So, the one “born of God” (a child of God) is the one who believes in Jesus (the Son of God). Jesus is the Son of God and the believer is a child of God. Jesus and the believer belong to the spiritual family of God.

And family members are supposed to stand by one another in times of adversities. The believer stands by Jesus in times of adversities by remaining faithful and true to Him. Jesus stands by the believer in times of adversities by empowering and strengthening him. Hence, the believer overcomes not in his own strength. The believer overcomes by the Lord’s presence with him and the Lord’s power in him. Jesus stands by the believer in his times of adversities. Therein lies a comfort we can rest in—a Christian is never alone in his adversities for Christ is with him.

When we feel forsaken, misunderstood, rejected and unloved, the world tempts us to accept its offer of fun and fantasy as an escape. But Christ stands by the one who belongs to and believes in Him. We can be comforted that when we are most helpless, Christ stands with us in His love. We can overcome because Jesus who has overcome the world loves and stands with us.

But how can we sense Christ’s love for us in times of adversities? We need to realize that His love is different from the usual human love. Man says, “I love you because you do this for me, and you do it now.” But Christ often says, “I

love you even though you misunderstand me because I do not do as you ask, or do not do it now.”

Indeed, Christ is willing to be misunderstood for the sake of man’s greater and wider interest. Christ need not have to die on the cross. He could have gone round pleasing people and avoided being crucified. But He chose to be misunderstood by men and to suffer the cross. Why? Because He had the greater and wider interest of all mankind at heart.

We live in an efficient society where we expect things to work and to work quickly. Impatience is our tendency. We even get impatient with the Lord because we misunderstand His delay as denial or as deficiency. We often forget that the Lord does not always cause things to happen instantly or all at one go. He often works in our situation slowly but surely.

He wants to test of faith and our faithfulness to take the long haul, not short cuts. And we are to be patient in order to see and appreciate the little things He is bringing about. Otherwise, we miss seeing Him working in our situation, and we fail to sense His presence in our situation. Your situation may be adverse. Improvements may be slow in coming:

- A difficult person you have to deal with may not turn soft overnight. But as you pray, learn to thank God for the little improvements you see in that person.
- Resentment in you may not go away overnight. But as you pray, learn to thank God for the little acts of love He has enabled you to show.
- The church may not grow much over the years in terms of numbers. But as you pray, learn to thank God for the evidences of growth in grace and faith in each person.
- Confusion may not disappear overnight. But as you pray, learn to thank God for the little signs of clarity He has allowed to shine through.

I remember the time when my elder daughter first began to crawl. It was funny. When she crawled, she could only move backward, not forward. So, if I wanted her to reach a ball, I would have to place it behind her, not in front of her.

Then, one day it happened. What happened? My daughter began to crawl not backward anymore, but forward. Slowly but surely she moved forward—one little step at a time.

And you know how I felt as a father then? I was delighted! One small step forward by my little girl was like a giant leap for all mankind.

It is the same when the Lord looks at our spiritual progress—He is delighted even with our one small step forward. So, what is the Lord doing in our situation? Do not despise, but delight even in the little things that He is bringing about as we obey Him little by little in our

situation. Believe that He remembers us. Believe that He is working in our situation. Believe that we are not alone in our situation because He loves and stands with us.

This is what it means to “believe that Jesus is the Son of God” (v. 5). We overcome because we are “born of God” (v. 4a)—we are children of God and with Jesus as “the Son of God”, we belong to the same spiritual family. We overcome not because Jesus sees us merely as people in need, but as people in His own spiritual family. We are not alone for we have a comfort to rest in—Jesus loves and stands with us in our adversities. So, there is no hopeless situation, only people who have lost hope in this promise.

Conclusion

God wants us to be overcomers as we face the hard challenges and realities in this world. We are to shout like victors and not groan like victims. We are on the winning side.

I like you to reflect on and pray about three things as we close:

- Whatever difficulty you are facing now, ask God to help you face it with a persevering attitude. Remember—we are not spared from adversities.
- Whatever difficulty you are facing now, ask God to deal with you first—i.e. your own negative attitudes and feelings. Remember—we can be our own toughest adversary.
- Whatever difficulty you are facing now, ask God to help you sense His presence and exercise patience, learning to give thanks even for the little things that He is bringing about. Remember—we are not alone for the Lord loves and stands with us.

Let's seek the Lord to help us keep these three thoughts constantly in mind so that we can indeed live as overcomers in Him. Amen!