

OVERCOMING THE WORLD

"For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." I John 5:4.

What does it mean to overcome the world? If the scientist should answer this question, he would say, "It is mastering the physical forces." He would solve every riddle, find a remedy for every ill and a solution for every problem. If the mystic should answer this question, he would say, "It is adopting a proper philosophy of life." One would run away from life's conflict, like the monks. Another would laugh them out of existence, like the Christian Scientist. Still another would call them "Fate," and bow the head in humble submission to them.

What does the Bible mean by overcoming the world? It recognizes the conflict between the spiritual and the physical life. It warns us that many good men have fallen, and we are not sufficient within ourselves to win the victory, that better men than we are have lost in the struggle with evil. But it holds up the possibility of victory for each one who will trust Christ. It means that in spite of the presence of evil and of the inherent weakness of men they can be strong in Christ. As Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me."

God intended that His children should be victors, so in grace He has made provision for them to be triumphant. Christianity promises us victory, but it means toil, sweat, blood and tears. The Christian life is not a summer picnic, but it is a ceaseless warfare. It is a stern conflict with the world, the flesh and the devil. Martin Luther said that Christ sets us with our backs against the wall so that we may fight from victory to victory. While the goal of victory, which is ever before the Christian, is not cheap or easy. It involves discipline, sacrifice and surrender. Spiritual victory will not come without setbacks and suffering.

What is the world? The world is human society, as it is seen organizing itself apart from God, in forgetfulness of God. Or, it is the sum total of all outward things considered as apart from God. It is everything, however innocent in itself, which comes as a screen between your soul and God. We cannot escape from the world, but it is something that we have to overcome. Many earnest souls have tried to get away from the world by seeking refuge in the cloister or in some lonely cell, but it has followed them there. God does not purpose that we should get away from the world, but that we should overcome it and rise above it. We shall be exposed to its appeals, to its fascinations, to its blandishments and to its temptations, but we need not be overcome by it. It is in the world that we are to fulfil our mission, to let our light shine, to bring precious souls to Christ and to glorify God.

If the world is not being overcome by us, then it is clear that we are being overcome by it. When is it that the world is conquering you? When you are induced to accept its views and maxims instead of the principles of God's Word, when you are influenced by the opinion of men and by the spirit of the age. The world is conquering you when it is petrifying all your desires after God, when it chills all of your aspirations upward, and when it steals out of your heart the very inclination to pray to God and to listen to His voice. The world is conquering you when it fills you with love of earthly things, and leads you to set your affections upon things below. The siren song of the world is always appealing to us, telling us what it will do if we obey its behests. There are the promises of profit, popularity and prestige. While they look attractive, they will produce headache, heartache, disillusionment and sorrow.

I. A Praiseworthy Ambition.

On top of the world. What modern expression more accurately defines what you and I are after? It is what we want above everything else. You may call it health or happiness or wealth, but it all simmers down to this--we want to be on top of the

world and not underneath it. And that is where we seldom are. Instead, we are loaded, burdened, and crushed by chance and circumstance. We are harnessed and bridled instead of sitting in the saddle ourselves. We are often driven by our work instead of driving it. It is not only adversity, but prosperity, too, that defeats a man.

This text says in the language of today, "This is the way we can get on top of the world--rule instead of being overruled, conquer instead of being beaten." Let us try to learn the secret.

John wrote this text somewhere near the close of the first century. Jerusalem had fallen in 70 A. D. Christians were scattered. The days of persecution had long since begun. The monster Nero had had his day. It was a dangerous thing even to be a Christian. Christians had proved good lions' rations, and so their lives were in daily peril. They had been driven to the subterranean vaults, the catacombs, for their fellowship and worship gatherings. Think of adding all those woes and perils to the already crushing circumstances of life, the battling of disease, and hunger and doubt. Now right in the midst of such a world John wrote to his fellow-Christians in somewhat this fashion: "We are not whipped; we are not beaten; we are conquerors; we are not slaves of fate; we are masters of life; we have overcome circumstances; we are on top of the world, not beneath it. And the secret of our triumph is faith."

The conquest of the world may be considered the highest object of human ambition. In this passage of Scripture "The World" is a brief title for that portion of human life and society which is alienated from God, through being centered on material objects and aims, and therefore hostile to the cause of Christ.

Sometimes the world brings its power to bear on us by direct assault. At other times it assails us by offers of compromise, by appealing to our interests and our desires. It seizes the opportunity of attacking us when we are worn out by manifold cares and duties and troubles. It's influence is continuous and persistent. If the world is not being overcome by us, then we are being overcome by it. When is it that the world is conquering us? When we are induced to accept its views and maxims instead of the principles of God's Word; when we are influenced by the opinions of men and the spirit of the age; when it fills us with the love of earthly things, and leads us to set our affections upon things below. To overcome the world's temptations and to live on top of the world is indeed a praiseworthy ambition.

II. A Possible Attainment.

John here connects the Christian Birth with Victory. He tells us that the destined end of the supernatural life is conquest. There is no doubt as to where John learned his lesson. He heard the Master talking about an hour before Gethsemane and heard Him say, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." The years that had passed since that hour had taught John something of its meaning, and had made him to understand how the Master's victory might belong to the servants.

The only one who was ever a complete victor over the world was Jesus Christ. The words which He shouted from the Cross, "It is finished," comprised the shout of a conqueror. Every other man has been a failure at some period of his life. Abraham was noted for his faith, and he failed right there--he denied his wife. Moses was noted for his meekness and humility, and he failed right there--he got angry. God kept him out of the promised land because he lost his temper. Elijah was noted for his power in prayer and for his courage, yet he became a coward. He was the boldest man of his day, and stood before Ahab, and the Royal Court, and all the prophets of Baal; yet, when he heard that Jezebel had threatened his life, he ran away to the desert, and under a juniper tree prayed that he might die. Peter was noted for his boldness, and a little maid scared him nearly out of his wits. As soon as she spoke to him, he began to tremble, and he swore that he didn't know Christ. John the beloved disciple was noted for his meekness; and yet we hear of him wanting to call fire

down from heaven on a little town because it had refused the common hospitalities.

The believer is in the world and therefore surrounded by it's influences, sentiments and ways. He has then to war against:

1. Sensuality--"the lust of the flesh."
2. Covetousness--"the lust of the eyes."
3. Ostentation--"the pride of life."

The world conquers me when it succeeds in hindering me from seeing, loving, holding communion with, and serving God my Father. On the other hand, I conquer it when I lay my hand upon it and force it to help me to get nearer to Him, to get more like Him, to think more often of Him, and to do His will more gladly and constantly. That is the victory--when you make the world a ladder to lift you up to God. That is it's right use. When the world comes between you and God as an obscuring screen, it has conquered you. When the world comes between you and God as a transparent medium, you have conquered it. To win the victory is to get it beneath your feet and stand upon it, and reach up thereby to God. Rule the world by making it help you to be wiser, gentler, nobler, more gracious, more Christlike, more full of God, and more like Him, and then you will get the deepest delight out of it.

III. A Practical Approach.

The true victory over the world is won by a new life, born of an kindred with God. God's own begotten ones are born to a new life of faith, love, righteousness, and inability to go on sinning in the same old way. That life is kindled in men's souls through their faith. When we turn humble faith to the Lord, He comes with all the might of His regenerating power and breathes into our deadness a new life, with new tastes, new desires, new motives, and new powers, making us able to wrestle with and to overcome the temptations that were and are too strong for us.

The text says, "Whatsoever is begotten of God keeps on conquering the world." Faith enables us to win a continuous victory over the world. It makes it possible for us to overcome its errors, its glare, its enticements, its threats, its unbelief, its hatreds, its opposition and its persecution. We can overcome:

1. By faith.
 - (1) We live by faith.
 - (2) We stand by faith.
 - (3) We walk by faith.
 - (4) We work by faith.

Only faith can give man the power to overcome the world. Mazzini, the great Italian patriot, spoke wisely when he said: "I do not know, speaking historically, a single great conquest of the human spirit, a single important step for the perfecting of human society which has not had its roots in a strong religious faith." What man can have the effrontery to stand in the face of deeply entrenched wrong unless he has in his heart a faith which has already promised victory? I am thinking of Paul as he faced the conquest of the world for Christ; I am thinking of Martin Luther as he faced the bulwarks of the Roman Church; I am thinking of Adoniram Judson as he faced a cruel and heathen Burma; I am thinking of William Booth as he faced a sodden and drunken London; I am thinking of Abraham Lincoln as he faced that whole institution of slavery which was thoroughly unchristian. Subtract faith and you have taken away the power by which these men, and the hundreds of leaders they represent, overcame the world.

In any hard endeavor faith is three fourths of the victory. The man without faith is whipped before he starts. The man with faith can pretty nearly say, "Fear not, I have overcome." The faith that John is talking about here is a dynamic force that leads a man to dare and do and die. Some definitions are helpful: "Faith is the daring of the soul to go further than it can see." And Principal Jack's: "Faith is reason grown courageous." Or Dean Inge's: "Faith is a kind of climbing instinct which draws us upward and onward." Or Kirsop Lake's: "Faith is not belief in spite of evidence, but life in scorn of consequence, a courageous trust in the great purpose of all things, and a pressing forward to find the work which is in sight whatever the price may be." Forsaking all I take Him."
--Phillips Brooks.

What tremendous endeavors still await the adventurous spirit of men of faith. You think sometimes that the great deeds have all been done. No, the greatest things have only been begun. We have conquered physical force by science and invention, but we have yet to conquer our own humanity and bend it to the purpose of right and righteousness.

Perhaps some are thinking--"And whence comes this faith that can put a man on top of the world?" Faith is at once a gift and an achievement. It is a gift from the heart of God, but it is given only to him who pays the price, and certainly it is kept only by him who pays the price. With some of you faith has weakened with the years. You wonder why. Where it has been killed by new knowledge in one instance, it has been clouded by sin in ten instances, and starved by indifference and neglect in twenty more.

- a. You cannot have this faith that overcomes if you are living a life of sin. Only a life of honesty and moral purity can foster a faith that endures and overcomes.
- b. Faith is a tender plant that requires culture. It withers and dies of neglect. We cannot have a day of great faith in a day of a neglected Bible, a neglected prayer life, and a neglected church.

2. By holy living.
3. By sturdy resistance.
4. By faithful testimony.

Let us maintain the fight to overcome the world earnestly, fearlessly, joyously, persistently, even to the end; and we will

"Win the day,
Though death and hell obstruct the way."