

Overcoming the World

By Paris Reidhead*

“Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 Joh. 5:1-5)

Interestingly that throughout this little epistle, John speaks about the very great importance of loving those that are born of God and loving our brethren that share common humanity with us, as well. He also has emphasized over and over again, the world. We need to understand and can from this portion, a little more as to what the world is. Here, we are told that we can identify the world because the world considers the commandments of God to be grievous, like a heavy weight too heavy to bear, too hard to carry. Anything that in that system of the world, any thought or any way of life or any company of people, who make you feel that God’s commandments, all together or any one of them, are grievous, are too heavy to carry, to you, that is the world.

How are you going to identify the world? I’m going to repeat it now because it’s so important. Any idea, any company, any writings or any conversation, any entertainment, anything that has the effect of making you feel that the commandments of God are grievous is, to you, the world. We have to put it on that personal basis because to someone else it might not have that effect. Therefore, it’s important that you should have this special working definition of the world.

Now, you think it through for just a moment. This is not some dim, shadowy enemy we’re talking about. But, this is an intelligible, precise, and practical definition of your enemy. This is something that you can understand, you can recognize, and against which you can be prepared. Hear it again.

Anything that has the effect of making the commandments to be irksome and galling and heavy and the word here is grievous, is the world. Now, too long we thought of the world as a list, long perhaps, but a list of activities or things or ideas that are generally accepted as world or worldliness. However long we make such a list, we’re going to have failed to include something. In order to eliminate the list, the necessity of memorizing it or trying to imitate Israel, the Jews of today as well as other days, who wanted to get everything that God commanding before them, they’d made a list of 613 acts of righteousness, part of them that you should not and part that you should do.

Well, I think their memories are about as good as mine. I’ve got a marvelous memory, but it’s awfully short. I can remember a lot for a few minutes but three or four minutes after I got it well in hand, it starts to fritter away and disappear. Now, I don’t want you to have such a list. This is worldliness and that’s worldliness and on and on and on.

No, anything that makes the will of God and the Word of God and the commandments of God and the commandments of the Holy Ghost to be grievous to you, why don’t you just call that the world? It is, so you’d better do that. It’s practical and it’s common sense. In this sense then, this isn’t something you can shun. If worldliness is not going there or not drinking that or not doing the other, you can pretty well isolate yourself from it. It works.

But if the world is any idea or any conversation or anything that should in any ways impinge upon your consciousness that makes God’s Word grievous, if that’s the world, then you can’t shun that. You just better be prepared to recognize it when it occurs and to deal with it the way God’s prescribed. God has been very precise. He said the only way to deal with the world is to overcome it.

That’s His Word, “Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world.” The way that this is effective is that anything that overcomes the world must be able to meet it and deal with it. So that when something within you is stirred and you begin to sense that God’s commandments are a bit galling and a bit irksome, you’re going to know precisely what to do about it.

Now since we have freedom of choice, we must choose. We've got to make a choice to shun all occupations and all companionships and any kind of entertainment and any kind of activity that we know will stir this response in us. We read this morning that we are to purify ourselves as He is pure. He that hath this hope in him purifies himself. Well, he that has been born of God overcomes the world and he does it by recognizing that anything that causes God's commandments to be grievous has no place in his life.

Now, we're told precisely how the world is to be overcome. Whatsoever is born of God overcomes the world. It's right here that the seed and the source of our victory begins. We should recognize that. We've been so prone to really think of those that are born of God being moral beings. We know that many times they're intellectual beings. As far as Scriptural knowledge, they're beings. But morally, the one that is born of God, old enough to know and understand and choose and receive Christ, is old enough to recognize that something does cause God's commandments to be grievous to him and to realize how he should deal with it.

This statement, "Whatsoever is born of God overcomes the world," implies that there is really no other way of overcoming the world, but by being born of God. Even God, Himself, couldn't enable us to do this any other way. There is in the new birth, that which secures and which alone can secure our overcoming the world. You see, God begets us by His Spirit when He adopts us into His family as sons. We saw this morning that process. We're awakened by the Spirit of God and convicted by the Spirit of God and brought to repentance. Now, there you are.

That is that point in our choice, the supreme, sovereign choice of the life when we choose to please God in everything. So having made that choice, having made that the governmental principle that's going to control our being as long as we live, we approach everything that would come to us in that light. We are going to please God. You see, here is where He begins that victory of overcoming the world, because He insists that there be a change of purpose from pleasing ourself to pleasing God. That has to be carte blanche. That has to be everything, not just a few things.

I think it was Charles Spurgeon that brought a sermon on repentance and one that we'd do well to have before us, at least the points he made. He said of talking about repentance that, "If it is real, it has to be entire." Said he, "Suppose that a person has 1,000 sins and he purposes to abandon and flee from 999 of them. But, he cherishes one that he hides in some closet of his mind and makes provision to indulge that one sin." Said Spurgeon, "Such a man who thinks himself to have repented is either criminal or crazy, because repentance, to be real, has to be entire and not partial."

The holding to that one, showed that he was trying to make an arithmetical or a statistical deal with God and actually hadn't had a change of purpose from pleasing himself to pleasing God. Then he proceeded to say that, "Repentance, in order to be real, has to be hearty and not reluctant. Anyone who grudgingly says, 'Well, all right, if that's what he insists on. I'd rather do that than burn in hell.' That such a person hasn't repented. He's only, again, tried to strike a bargain with God and has made mental reservation to return at some time, after he's assured himself that he's going to protect against the loss that he fears."

He then said that, "Repentance, to be real, has to be permanent and not temporary. That if it is just for a period of time, a few days or weeks or months or years, it is clear evidence at the point that that has changed back to what it was before, that the repentance was furious, not real. It was a mockery that had no religious significance to it. Has to be entire and not partial, has to be hearty and not reluctant, and has to be permanent and not temporary."

Well, you can understand that possibly much of this moral change in the life of people is going to begin with this work of the Spirit of God in repentance. It's that reason why it's such a terrible crime against God when certain teachers felt that they had the liberty of wresting the Scripture to their destruction and that of others and said that repentance was not to be preached today. Because it's there that the direction of the life is changed. A 180-degree change from, I'm going to do what I want to do and please me to I'm going to do what God wants me to do and please Him.

Now, you've repented. If you're born of God, you've repented. It's had to be hearty. It's had to be entire and it's had to be permanent or you couldn't have been born of God, if these statements that Spurgeon made are actually germane to the issue. I believe they are. Our Lord said, "Except you'll repent, you'll perish" (Luk. 13:3). I find nothing in the three statements I've

given to you from Spurgeon that would indicate that they were unreasonable and unfair and unscriptural. No, to the contrary, I think they're basic minimum.

So, it is that in the new birth that proceeded by this work of repentance there is the ground work laid in the direction of the life to please God, to glorify Him, to serve Him, to satisfy Him, to make Him happy. Upon the basis of repentance and that heart faith that results in savingly receiving the Son of God, you can understand that when the Spirit of God joins Himself in this life-giving work to the human spirit that John should be supported in his statement that, "whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world."

If, on the other hand, you could do as many have done and for years I did, that is to present Christ as a hell insurance scheme and the tipping the hat to Jesus requiring none of the actions that I've identified for you: awakening and conviction and repentance and saving faith, merely an acknowledgment of you. If that's where you stand, then you can say, "Well, how could anyone who simply had the righteousness of Christ imputed to him with no requirement of the change of purpose?" Well, obviously such a one couldn't be expected to overcome the world. By the same token, such a one does not meet the definition of having been born of God.

Now, you say, "Well, certainly you're implying a long time, aren't you, from being awakened to being born of God?" No, I'm not implying a long time at all. God can do it in one minute or five. He can do it in one week or five. He can do it in one month or five. He's perfectly capable of putting time into whatever frame He wishes and He's able, in relation to the individual.

This past week on the last Lord's Day, Del Thompson was here. Some years ago, I had the privilege of being here at Bethany when Cam Thompson was here. Cam Thompson's testimony was there dying in the hospital in Jacksonville of tuberculosis, a life of gross and vile sin. God in His sweet, sovereign, mysterious, and powerful grace awakened Cam, convicted him, brought him to repentance, wonderfully saved him, immediately healed him of tuberculosis, gloriously filled him with the Holy Spirit, and called him into His service, all in one time.

Now, that doesn't fit the average pattern. It certainly didn't fit mine. But just about the time I get it all worked out neatly and figured this is the way God's going to have to do it, He loves to show me that all of our neat, little outlines can give way to His sovereign and supernatural grace when He works in lives. I accept that and I rejoice in that. It doesn't cause me any problems.

Only thing I'm going to say, whosoever is born of God has been awakened by the Spirit, convicted by the Spirit, brought to repentance, has savingly received Christ, and has a witness in the Spirit, and is a new creation, whether it takes one minute or one week or one month. That's not the issue, the time. Time isn't a factor, the reality is the factor. So, "whatsoever is born of God," we're told, "overcomes the world." We're begotten by the agency of His Spirit, confirming that the change of our purpose from pleasing ourself to pleasing God.

Go back in your thinking to the garden. There the serpent insinuated to Mother Eve and to Father Adam... I used to think that the serpent didn't contact Mother Eve until Adam was gone somewhere else in the garden. But, I had to conclude that that was incorrect because it says, "... and she turned and gave the fruit to him" (Gen. 3:6). There wasn't a great deal lapse of time. They were both involved in it. I have to think it was addressed to her, but they were both involved in it. He insinuated, did this serpent, that God was unfair. That's what he said. He lied, he said, "You say that God told you not to eat this fruit. Look how beautiful it is. Isn't it good to look at? And to taste it? Oh, it's delicious. More than that, when you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you'll know good and evil and you'll be like God" (Gen. 3:5).

Now, they were like God. They were made in His image and His likeness. So, the whole thing was a fallacy, if not an outright lie. But, it had the effect of causing that pair to feel that God's commandment not to eat of the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden was grievous, a commandment too heavy to be borne by them. So they succeeded and every child of God that's been led aside by his appetites and fallen into sin and every truly born again child of God has first been tempted. He's been tempted because the commandments seem grievous.

It's something like this, even God, in my situation... Oh, I know it's wrong for everybody else, but my situation is so different

than everybody else's. My problems are so acute. The difficulties are so great that whereas it would be wrong for Tom, Dick, or Harry, the exception is going to be made for me. Commandment seems grievous. Now when we were born of God, we had the whole of our inner man renewed into harmony with a new purpose. Like the Lord Jesus, we cry, "I delight to do thy will, O God. Thy law is written upon my heart and I love thy law" (Psa. 40:8).

But still, we as children of God must realize that anything that causes the commandments of God and the will of God and the rule of God's love and law in our life to seem grievous, that's the world. We've got to face it as such. Those that are born of God are going to overcome the world.

Now, how? How are we going to overcome the world? We're told here very specifically, "... and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." This is not an achievement that's completed at once. This is a life-long business. I think it was Theodore Beza¹, a successor to John Calvin... I disagree with great many elements of his theology but I have great sympathy for his great heart of love and tenderness toward God. At the age of nearly 70, he said, "Oh, God. Save me from making shipwreck of my life when I'm just in sight of the harbor."

A long life of serving God and now he's saying, I'm so close to finishing. Don't let me do some stupid, foolish thing in my old age that I shunned in my youth. It was Rutherford², who was one of the great holy writers that so drew our hearts to God in love who said, at the age of 83, "The longer I live and the closer I walk to the Lord, the more I realize the abysmal depths of capacity for sin in the human heart." Don't ever forget you're a child of God. That there isn't any sin that anyone ever committed of which you are not capable, given the opportunity and given the incentive.

There is victory but it's victory that must be exercised. Oh everyone I know is looking for an experience with God that will wind their little clock and set it so completely that it never needs to be wound and set again. I've had known people that have been seeking sanctification in terms of an experience so that they would never be tempted again. Oh, I wish the Word of God taught such a state. For I'm sure all of us would diligently seek that.

But, I find it not in the Word. Rather, I find Him saying, "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall" (I Cor. 10:12). Long as we live, we're going to have the capacity to be tempted. Think of it, did you ever achieve an experience that immunized you to temptation? You know, don't you, that it would mean that you were holier than your wonderful Lord? Of whom it was said, "He was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

Temptation isn't sin. Long as you live, you're going to be subject to it. There'll be that within you, those appetites, urges, and drives that when God made man He said, "It is good." There's going to be a world outside that's still appealing saying, "Choose yourself how to gratify your appetites and satisfy and please yourself." Temptation will continue.

I say it's a life-long business, is this. But, "He that is born of God overcomes the world and this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith." This is a prolonged and a continued triumph, as well as a prolonged and a continuous strife. Both of them are there. Our being born of God, indeed, gives us the victory. It puts us in the right position and it endows us with the needful power for victory. But, we still have to work day to day, day by day, in overcoming the world. We overcome it through the exercise of our faith.

I think I told you earlier, but I still think it will illustrate the point, I was called to speak to a group of university students out of several of the colleges in the Boston and Massachusetts area at a retreat center in New Hampshire. I'd been there the year before and I arrived on Friday afternoon, a bit earlier than we'd anticipated. When I got there, there was a young man banging against the piano trying to learn how to play. He wasn't doing very well. A lot better than I could have done, so I'm not critical of that. When he saw me, he immediately stopped, turned around on the stool... I was over near him shaking hands with him, speaking to him. I recognized him from the year before.

¹ Theodore Beza (1519-1605) Author, translator, educator, theologian who assisted and later succeeded John Calvin.

² Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) A Scottish Presbyterian pastor, theologian and author, and one of the Scottish Commissioners to the Westminster Assembly.

I sat down; he asked me if you would. He told me he wanted to talk to me. He said, "Mr. Reidhead, I came a little early, in case, just to get you, because I wanted to tell you something. I just wanted to help a little if I could. I want to put it this way; I just hope that you're not going to give us any of that victory stuff that you gave us last year." I said, "Maybe it's a good thing I got here early, too, if you're going to help me. Why don't you think I should give you any of that, that you call victory stuff?"

"Well," he said, "it's easy. It doesn't work, that's why. I'd thought you'd like to know it doesn't work so that you wouldn't embarrass yourself by telling the students about it." I said, "Well, I'm awful glad. If it doesn't work, I sure don't want to give it. But, fill me in. Help me a little. What makes you think it doesn't work?" "Well," he said, "last year at this same retreat, you talked to us about it and I listened. Oh my, I was so excited because I had a problem and I just knew that when I got back to school that I was going to be able to lick that problem." He said, "We got along fine for a couple of days and then after a while that problem came back, a real temptation. I did what you told us to do."

"Oh," I said, "did you? What did you recall I told you to do?" "Well, I understood what you told us was to use that Scripture verse you gave us." "Oh," I said, "which verse do you reference to?" "Well, you know the one. 'There's no temptation overtaken you but such as is common to man. That God is faithful, will not suffer you to be tempted above what you are able, but will with the temptation make a way of escape that you may be able to bear it.'" (I Cor. 10:13) He said, "I quoted that verse and quoted it and quoted it and quoted it. I still went right ahead and did it. It didn't work."

"Well," I said, "I'm awful glad you told me. Maybe I can correct this for some of the rest of them. If they did the same thing, I really did fail you and so it's been helpful. But, I did want to ask you one question." This time, we opened our Bibles to the verse. I said, "Well, read it again for me, would you?" He said, "But God will with the temptation make a way of escape." Now, I said, "Tell me, what's the way of escape?" "Well," he said, "the verse." "No," I said, "the verse doesn't tell you the way of escape. It tells you that there is a way of escape. It's not this verse. All this verse says is there is a way of escape, but this isn't the way of escape. This verse merely says, God has made a way of escape. I guess you didn't get that part, did you?"

"No," he said, "I didn't. I thought it was the verse." I said, "Oh, no. There's no victory in this verse. All this verse does is tell you that God knows that you wouldn't be tempted beyond anybody else and that He was faithful. So, He made a way of escape that you wouldn't have to yield to temptation." "Well," he said, "what is it?" Then I took him back to the fact that the day Jesus Christ died for him, since the Lord Jesus was there representing him, dying that death that was required if God was to be just and forgive sinners. That in God's eyes looking down on Calvary that the Lord Jesus Christ was so completely identified with him that from God's point of view there were two people on the cross, Christ and him.

Then, I took him to the verses, "Knowing this that our old man is crucified with Christ that the body of sin might be destroyed" (Rom. 6:6). And Paul's testimony, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live" (Gal. 2:20). I explained to him that victory comes when he realizes that the day Jesus Christ died for him, in his place and in his stead, that he, from the Father's eyes and now from his, died with Christ. And that when he reckoned himself to be crucified with Christ that reckoning released the resurrection life of Christ into his heart that broke the power of temptation and insulated him against temptation, gave him victory.

He said, "Ah, that's how it works." He said, "Boy, I'm glad you came back this year because I suppose there's a lot of folks that are here last year that missed it the way I did." Well, I don't know whether that's the case or not, there or here. But, I want you to know that the victory that overcomes the world is our faith, but it's not faith in our faith. That's a big point. It's not faith in our faith that gives us victory. It's faith in the Word of God and in the reality of what the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished for us.

It's faith in the fact that the day He died for us, we died with Him. That we were united with Him in His death, crucified with Him. That I am, my nature, died the day the Lord Jesus Christ died. That's history. That's history and I reckon myself to be dead and that reckoning based on that my history enables me to walk through this moment in victory. "Whatsoever is born of God overcomes the world and this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith."

Our faith in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ, our faith in our union with Christ in His death, and in His burial and in His resurrection. You see, we were crucified with Him to have victory over ourselves, buried with Him to have victory over the

world. And “quickened and raised and seated in Him in the heavenlies” to have victory over “principalities and powers and the rulers of the darkness of this age” (Eph. 2:6; 3:10).

So, the Word declares that this is the victory that “overcomes the world, even our faith.” Now, John had dealt with this in the 15th chapter and the 4th verse when he declared, “Abide in Me,” quoting our Lord, “and I in you.” You live in Me crucified with Me to have victory over yourself then buried, with Me to have victory over the world, and quickened and raised and seated in Me and with me, thus in the heavenlies, to have victory over “principalities and powers.” And you will live in Me and “you present your body to Me as a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). Then, I can live in you.

“He that abideth in Me,” said our Lord, “and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit. Without Me, you can do nothing” (Joh. 15:5). Now, John wrote that. He isn’t putting into this little general epistle everything that had been given to him in the gospel, just what we need. So, he’s reminding us that being born of God has brought us into union with Christ and in union with Christ; therefore, as we exercise our faith on that moment by moment, day by day basis, we continue to have victory over the world.

It’s in our union with Christ that this victory is made effective in us. Are you living there? Have you ever had one instance of victory because you reckoned yourself to be crucified with Christ? Well, if you’ve had one instance of victory through your reckoning, then you know where the switch is that releases the resurrection power of Christ into your life. So any time you’re tempted, you can go back to that switch and put it on. “Father, part of me that would think way and feel this way and do this, that’s the part that died the day Christ, died.”

Oh, friend, don’t think that it gets any easier. I know it. There was a period in my life when I didn’t know how to have victory. Oh, the day that that victory became real was like an emancipation. But, then there comes times when situations develop and we know how to have victory, but we maybe think the person that we should give them a good telling off instead of exercising victory. So then the issue isn’t can I have victory, but the issue is do I want to have victory or do I want to vent my steam and relieve my spleen by telling what they may think they deserve.

Well, the case is clear. The case is clear. If you know how to have victory and you don’t do it and I know how to have victory and I don’t do, we come under another Scripture that says, “Him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (Jam. 4:17). Perhaps, there’s even a little bit more excuse for the fellow that doesn’t know how to have victory than the one who does and doesn’t exercise it.

We come back to the text that we have, “whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world. This is the victory that overcomes the world.” “Who is he that overcometh the world but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God.” Oh, can’t you see what God has done in giving us these evidences of the new birth? He’s given to us a beautiful means of our being certain of our relationship to God and our being able to help those who come to us who aren’t certain of their relationship to God.

Now, go back to the person that came to you and said, “I’m not sure that I’ve been born again.” What do you do? You just bring them to the Word, open it, let them read it, talk about it, trust the Spirit of God to work. As you go through these eight evidences of the new birth, getting to this last one, do you have victory over the world? Do you overcome the world? Whatsoever is born of God overcomes the world. Do you?

You see what’s happening. The Spirit of God is doing the work. You’re not having to presume to know what goes on in the human spirit. You’re standing outside where you should be. You’re bringing the person to the Word. Now, the Spirit of God is working. One of two things are going to happen, they’re either going to say, “Praise God, I know I’ve passed from death to life.” Or they’re going to say, “On the basis of this, I haven’t passed from death to life.” Well, that’s not an insoluble problem, is it?

We know how to point them to Him and tell them how holy God is and what He did and how sinful they are and what they must do. When they do what they must do, God will do what He’s promised. This time, friend, don’t play God. Don’t tell them

what's happened. You just simply say, "Now, you go and do what God's Word says. And when you do, you're going to know. When you know, you can come and tell me and then I'll know that everything's right."

Someone asked me this morning, they said, "Well, what do you differently now than you used to do?" The answer is, now, I just wait until the person comes and tells me. I try to show them how they can find out from the Lord. I believe that's what God wants us to do. These are the evidences of eternal life. May God bless them to your heart and, through you, make them a blessing to many, many others. Shall we pray?

Father of Jesus, we love thee. Our purpose is to please Thee in everything as long as we live. Father, Thy commandments are not grievous. When we sense and feel that anything causes them to appear irksome and galling and heavy to carry, right then we're going to recognize that that is the world. Those that are born of God have overcome the world. This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the revelation Thou hast given to us in Thy Word of our relationship with Him, our union with Him, and our identification with Him. So grant, Father, that we may live in such a way that in that hour when we see Him face to face, we may hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of Thy Lord" (Mat. 25:21). This we ask in His name and for His sake, Amen.

* Reference such as: Delivered at Bethany Fellowship, Minneapolis, MN on Sunday Evening, June 12, 1988 by Paris W. Reidhead, Pastor.