

Overcoming the World
The First Sunday after Easter
(From the Epistle: 1 John 5:4-12)

4. For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. 5. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? 6. This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. 7. For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. 8. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. 9. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. 10. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. 11. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.

These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

I remember when I first began to read the New Testament as a young man, there were certain sayings of Jesus that absolutely astonished me. Principal among them included this: *I have overcome the world.*

Think about the absurdity of the statement, taken at face value. Here is a poor first century Jewish Preacher, whose wild popularity had given way over time to widespread condemnation by the religious authorities, a Man being hunted mercilessly by His enemies, on the eve of torture and crucifixion by the Romans, shut away with His disciples, uttering such impossible words. Why, what can He possibly mean under these circumstances? Is it some desperate cry for self-affirmation? Or are they the Truth, calmly and confidently spoken by the only One who could ever make such a claim under *any* circumstance?

It is the word *world* that throws us completely off balance. One might claim to triumph in some political arena in a partisan squabble. Or one could win in a debate. Jesus had certainly put His enemies to silence handily on several occasions. Another might proclaim how he had overcome poverty, or abuse, or physical handicaps, in order to attain a cherished goal. Jesus certainly had risen way, way above His own very real set of limitations. But it is the *world* that He says He has bested.

What does the word *world* make you think of? We might imagine this huge planet Earth, with its multiplied nations, peoples, and cultures, as well as its vast physical presence. It is a concept almost too large to fit into our minds, even in an age that claims that the world is shrinking. But it is not the planet Jesus claims to have overcome, because it is His creation (Col. 1:16a), and He once pronounced it *very good* (Gen. 1:31a). It is not even the entire human race, because *all souls* belong to Him (Ezek. 18:4a).

It is critically important that we understand what is meant here by *the world*: it is that entire self-perpetuating system, populated by men, but overseen by immensely powerful evil spirits, that lives in open defiance of and sworn rebellion against the God of this universe. It is the pride of mankind, worked to its fullest potential, cultivated to its highest proportion, encouraged and urged on by satanic design, whose end is the expulsion of God and anything connected with Him --if it were possible-- and the deification of man and the spirit of man in His place. Civilizations have arisen based upon this principle. Empires have come and gone with this very end in mind. In our times, it often masquerades under the apparently harmless and progressive disguises of learning, art, culture, science, and humanism. But blatant or euphemized, it is all of the same cloth. (For biblical references to this theme see: Eph. 6:10-12; 1 Jn. 2:15-17 and 5:19b; 1 Cor. 2:8; Ps. 2: 1,2, as quoted in Acts 4:25-28; Lk. 4:5,6).

It is *the world* that conspired against Jesus Christ from the moment of His arrival until His crucifixion. The greatest monuments to men of Christ's day --whether the invincible might of the Roman empire, or the proud, austere edifice of the Mosaic Law which characterized Jewish religious practice-- colluded to extinguish one solitary human Life whose appearance on earth brought with it the awful promise of divine Judgment of all that opposes God: trial, sentence, and execution.

In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world (Jn. 16:33b).

Today's Epistle promises the believer a similar victory, and it is just as implausible: *whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world* (vs. 4). But it is important to remember two things. The first is that our victory is made possible only by Christ's triumphant battle with the world accomplished by His death and resurrection. The second is that there is a vast difference in magnitude between His arena of conflict and ours. Success in our individual struggles with the world, as daunting as they are to us, are guaranteed by His shattering defeat of the entire principle of the world, won through mortal combat with its chief forces (see Col. 2:15).

When I first came to Christ, the idea of *overcoming the world through Him* brought me great relief. At that time, I recognized that it was *the world* that had very nearly succeeded in killing me. Whether it was the expectation of success that pervades society, generates destructive compulsions, and aims itself with almost malicious intent especially against the young; whether it was the impetus to immorality and indulgence of the senses, driven to extremes, presented everywhere as the norm; whether it was the art, poetry, and literature of a century that seemed by and large to hate life and hate God, engulfing all in its cynical self-destructive iconoclasm; all of these proclaimed death to impressionable, honest, vulnerable hearts. It was only after I had accepted Christ, and died to self, that my now spiritually-opened eyes perceived that God and *the world* are utterly at odds, and the one has no sympathy nor place for the other. To realize that

...*whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith, and... Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God* (vv. 4,5) was to finally understand the destructive dynamic that had nearly extinguished my life. Freed from its strangle-hold, I found myself for the first time in years able to sing, and to laugh, and to rejoice, and to praise the One who had achieved such a deliverance for me, and for so many others.

So why do so many others put up with *the world* and its fruit? Why are they not propelled into personal crises of the same sort that I had experienced? Surely today, a few decades later, the same forces of *the world* are even more active, even harder at work to keep souls from Christ, and either lull them into submission, false assurance, cheap peace, and indifference, or crush them to powder, especially if they show the least signs of wishing to be free. To such questions we have no adequate answers.

But by our lives lived for Christ, by our steadfast refusal to ...*[l]ove not the world, neither the things that are in the world* (1 Jn. 2:15), by our continual exercise of our *victory that overcometh the world, even our faith* (5:4), and by our loving and judicious proclamation of these truths, we can assist others in finding their way out of bondage and into *the glorious liberty of the children of God* (Rom. 8:21b).

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.