

Overwhelmed or Overcoming?

6th Sun. of Easter – 05/09/21 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: 1 John 5:1-8 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 4-5 “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?”

Introduction

✘ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

✘ I’m starting today by asking you all two simple questions. How many of you have ever felt overwhelmed? Now, raise your hand only if you’re comfortable answering this second question: How many of you are feeling overwhelmed right now, in some part of your life?

→ There are so many things; so many categories of life in which you and I can feel overwhelmed: our relationships among family, with friends, at work or school; our health and well-being – both physical and psychological; dealing with our financial situations; wrestling with all of the political issues of our day; considering our ability to be safe and secure; and of course there is the area of spiritual and faith-oriented issues as well. You and I have so many possibilities; so many ways, that we can struggle with feelings of being overwhelmed.

✘ John, the author of the text before us this morning, as an apostle of our Lord, certainly had a lot of occasions to be overwhelmed.

→ When you consider all of the very positive, yet amazing things he witnessed in his time with Jesus – things like the miracles and healings, the deep and divine truths that Jesus taught, and of course Christ’s resurrection and ascension – I’m sure it was overwhelming at times.

→ But John and the others with Jesus certainly faced overwhelming experiences that most would characterize as negatives – times when their lives were in great danger from storms at sea, to threats of arrest and imprisonment, all the way up to and including the fear of facing the same kind of treatment and injustice and torture and death as Jesus did.

→ One can only imagine how overwhelming it must have been to be a follower and believer of Jesus at the time that John wrote his letter to the ones he addressed in chapter 2:1 as “My little children” – that is his fellow family members in the body of believers – all who believe with him as he begins our section today here in chapter five, by confessing “that Jesus is the Christ”.

✘ You see, that’s the area of life that John addresses with you and me as his readers today, where those both of his day and ours as well can be tempted to feel overwhelmed or “burdened” (v.3) because of the truths and commands of our Lord Jesus.

→ And so John writes to them/us in an encouraging tone so that we will not be overwhelmed by the world and its false and misleading ways, but rather, that we might follow John in trusting that the love of Christ, who is the object of our faith, is the One who overcomes all that seeks to overwhelm us in this world.

I. Be not overwhelmed by the world.

✘ At the beginning of John’s letter he stresses that he is a firsthand eye-witness to Jesus; to His life, death, resurrection and ascension as the Son of God who came to this world in the flesh.

→ He does this because he does not want his readers to be overwhelmed and led astray by the plethora of false claims and heretical groups in the world who were seeking to draw those new

Christians away from Jesus and the truth that Scripture and the apostles were teaching about Him.

→ Almost all of those false beliefs still exist today – often with different labels, but still just as dangerous to our faith in Christ.

✘ A prime example of the false claims John had to refute are connected to a man named Cerinthus, an early false prophet who taught that Jesus was only a human man, born of Mary and Joseph in the natural way rather than being miraculously conceived within the virgin by the Holy Spirit.

→ He taught that Jesus was not the promised Messiah, but that the Messiah's spirit only came upon Jesus at His baptism and then left Him shortly before His crucifixion and death.

→ This meant a complete denial of Christ's resurrection since he believed Jesus was only a human being like all of the rest of us.

→ These are the same beliefs of many or most in our world today, as they claim that Jesus was only a man and not the Son of God and Savior of the world. And they pressure you and me in our faith to trust in human reason above the truths of God's Word; to stop using our faith in Christ as what they call "a crutch" and instead to "buck-up and face things with a tough, 'take care of yourself before anyone else' kind of approach".

→ Polycarp, one of John's colleagues, shared his view of how dangerous Cerinthus and his teachings were when he heard that the heretic was in the same bathhouse as they were in. He shouted, "Let us flee, lest the building fall down; for Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is inside!"

✘ Well, you and I, even today must certainly take caution, yet not be overwhelmed by the many so-called "Christians" and "Christian Churches" who, like Cerinthus, are partly or entirely renouncing the historic Christian faith. Examples like:

→ the famous Episcopal bishop, John Shelby Spong, who denies the virgin birth of Jesus (Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus, [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992], 3).

→ or the Princeton-educated theologian Bart Ehrman who claims that the church just made Jesus into God and denies that Jesus is God in the flesh.

→ or the Jehovah's Witnesses who teach that Jesus is actually the incarnation of the archangel Michael, which means He is below God as a created being.

→ or the Mormon church that claims to be Christian while still rejecting the Biblical teaching of the Holy Trinity, saying that Jesus is just one of many lesser gods, like we humans are – who continually seek to become more perfect every day by doing good works.

✘ These are just a few of the many "burdens" that the world and the devil bombard us with – trying to break us down in our faith; hoping that we will become so "overwhelmed" that we eventually turn away from Jesus and His truth.

→ Yes, they try and focus your attention upon the many ways and times that you have fallen short in sin; like the times that you might have actually been tempted to consider a false teaching about Jesus; or when you have become complacent and too afraid or too lazy in your faith to speak out against those who teach what is false; or when you perhaps compromised the truth about Jesus in order to avoid a conflict with someone who was pushing back against what you believe; or maybe when you fell to the sin of being silenced all together out of fear instead of speaking out in love and boldly confessing the truth about Jesus; the truth that He is, as John says in verse one, "the Christ" and that in your baptism you have been "born of God" with the Holy Spirit who now lives actively inside of you as a loving and proud Christian; as a child of God by His saving grace.

→ These tensions are very real, aren't they? They can overwhelm us. They can cause us to view God's own gifts, like His Commandments and His unchangeable truths in Scripture not as gifts, but as burdensome to the point that our faith in Christ can be put at risk and our view of life itself can be one of great despair.

II. Rather, be overcomers of the world.

✘ John understands all of this. And he writes to you and me today, calling us not to be overwhelmed by the world but instead to be overcomers through our Spirit-borne faith in Jesus, who is the Christ and victor over all that wants to tear us down.

→ In verse one, he refers to the connection of faith created and given to us in our baptism, when we were "born of God" and given the ability to know with certainty that Jesus truly is the Christ; the Son of God in the flesh.

→ In verse two John shows that this victory given to all who are "born of God" connects us believers together in love and support of each other as our fellow "children of God".

✘ But how are we to be true overcomers of the world and this struggle with sin and the temptations of the devil?

→ Well, again it is only by our connection to Jesus as the Christ. We can't overcome the world on our own. We are imperfect, flawed sinners. And Jesus Himself even said in John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world".

→ As it must be, it is all about what Jesus has done, for us and in us and still does through us! He's the one who perfectly kept His commands on our behalf so that now as Paul says in Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus". Jesus says His burden "is light" (Matt. 11:30).

→ We overcome the world by His sacrifice on the cross for our sins; those sins of doubt and complacency and compromise and silence regarding our confession of Him.

✘ This is the "victory that has overcome the world" as John says in verses 4-5 – "our faith" and trust in Jesus alone! With Jesus, we don't have to be the ones who overcome sin, death and devil, because Jesus has already done it for us!

III. Be overcomers by the Spirit, water, and blood.

✘ And He has given us, as His believers, three witnesses in His Word and in our lives to strengthen us and help us and comfort us and guide us to stay on track, not as those who are overwhelmed but as overcomers each day.

→ In verses 6-8 John identifies these as "the Spirit and the water and the blood". Referencing the water and the blood, John takes us back to Jesus on the cross when the soldier pierced Jesus' side to verify that He was dead, "and at once there came out blood and water" (Jn. 19:34).

✘ It is The Holy Spirit who has inspired and revealed the truth about Jesus and His death on the cross in the pages of Holy Scripture. He's the one who unites us to Jesus by faith when we are baptized into His bloody death and when we partake of that same life-giving blood in Holy Communion.

→ In the water and Word of baptism, the Holy Spirit cleanses us of sin by Christ's death and resurrection power and He connects us to Jesus, who has overcome the world only because He is truly God in the flesh. That truth is the only way you and I and anyone else can have any way of moving from "overwhelmed" to "overcomer".

- ✘ One of the early Church fathers, John Chrysostom, wrote about these three witnesses. He said, “Beloved, do not pass over this mystery without thought; it has yet another hidden meaning, which I will explain to you. I said that water and blood symbolized baptism and the holy Eucharist (Holy Communion). From these two sacraments the Church is born: from baptism, ‘the cleansing water that gives rebirth and renewal through the Holy Spirit’, and from the holy Eucharist. Since the symbols of baptism and the Eucharist flowed from His side, it was from His side that Christ fashioned the Church, as he had fashioned Eve from the side of Adam. ...As God then took a rib from Adam’s side to fashion a woman, so Christ has given us blood and water from His side to fashion the Church” (St. John Chrysostom, The Catecheses [Catechesis 3:13–19; Sources chrétiennes 50:174–77]).

Conclusion

- ✘ So it is that in Christ alone, dear believers, you and I have been reborn and fashioned to be a beloved part of Christ’s true Church.
 - ➔ And in Christ; by His power alone, we ultimately overcome everything in the world; everything that would seek to overwhelm us. Yes, Jesus is our victor, our Savior and our God. To Him be all glory today and forever; for Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.*